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Patrick Baert ^a & Filipe Carreira da Silva ^b

^a Department of Sociology , University of Cambridge , United Kingdom

^b Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon , Portugal
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Pragmatism defended: A reply to Simon Susen

Patrick Baert^a and Filipe Carreira da Silva^{b*}

^a*Department of Sociology, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom;*

^b*Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon, Portugal*

Introductory remarks

We would like to thank Simon Susen for his thorough critical assessment of our book.¹ We have limited space to reply, so we will restrict ourselves to a short rebuttal of his main criticisms of the concluding chapter of our book (Chapter 9: ‘Conclusion: Social Theory for the Twenty-First Century’) and leave aside most of his earlier points, many of which focus on what he considers to be the considerable strengths of our book. We do have to stress from the outset, however, that the concluding chapter of our book presents a *summary* of our position developed properly elsewhere, which explains Susen’s repeated complaints about the cursory nature of some of the arguments presented in *Social Theory of the Twentieth Century and Beyond*. As a reply to these complaints, we refer to the other texts in which we elaborate on the various theses (e.g. Baert 2005; 2007). Here, a summary of our position vis-à-vis his criticisms will suffice (For his own position, see Susen 2007).

Before addressing his criticisms of our last chapter, we would like to reply to his broader allegation that our book presents a selective overview of social theory. Of course it is selective, like any history is. We made a decision to discuss the broad theoretical developments, rather than their specific applications in various politically charged areas. This meant, for example, that we did not treat gender theory as a separate entity, but we did address some gender issues along the way, whenever relevant. Susen makes, however, a further claim which we find most peculiar: he complains that various minorities, amongst which, for instance, disabled people, are under-represented amongst our selection of theorists. Our answer is straightforward: we selected people on the basis of the quality of their writings and their significance in the history of the discipline, not on the basis of any other features. Whilst it could legitimately be argued that we should have created more space for discussing, for instance, theorists of disability (there is some discussion of this issue in the book, but there could have been more), it is plainly ridiculous to suggest that we should have included a theorist with a disability. This is not to say that our selection cannot be contested, and indeed what counts as the canon is a complex and deeply divisive issue. Yet, quotas make a poor basis to form decisions of this kind.

*Corresponding authors. Emails: pjnb100@cam.ac.uk; fcs23@ics.ul.pt

A few words on Susen's comments on the new chapter (Chapter 8: 'A Brave New World? The Empirical Turn in Social Theory') are also in order. Firstly, his claim that 'social theory, including its *classical* variants, has *always* been a discursive conglomerate of *different* – that is, competing and often contradictory – perspectives' does not resist historical scrutiny. Today's pluralism can and should be distinguished from the post-war consensus built around Parsonian structural functionalism, which, in turn, can be distinguished from the earlier pluralism of the formative years of the social sciences. This of course includes important national variations but is, nonetheless, a more rigorous description of the history of social theory in the twentieth century than Susen's contention about a persistent and continued pluralism – some epochs were clearly more pluralistic than others (ours is particularly so), and there are national intellectual traditions that are unmistakably more complex and pluralistic than others (Silva 2007, 116–22; 2008, 1–29; Silva and Vieira 2009). Secondly, Susen's criticism that we contradict ourselves when criticizing authors for not backing up their arguments with empirical evidence is not entirely fair – after all, *Social Theory in the Twentieth Century and Beyond* deals with the history of social theory, and it is not a social theory treatise, let alone a sociological analysis of some concrete phenomenon. We discuss *theories* – the logically related networks of concepts that define them, their authors, the social and intellectual contexts in which they were produced and reproduced, as well as the way each of these theories relates to other theories. This does not imply a preference for theory over practice; instead, our goal has been to alert our readers, especially younger readers, to the necessity to back up their empirical observations with theoretically informed hypotheses and models, which should take them beyond explanation towards understanding, criticism, and edification. Thirdly, we cannot see why Susen finds it inappropriate to designate the work of Sennett, Bauman, or Beck as illustrative of a larger contemporary trend away from the grand theorizing efforts of authors such as Habermas, Bourdieu, Giddens, or Alexander in the 1980s: we concede that this is not a particularly original claim, but it is certainly an accurate one. Their work constitutes an 'empirical turn' in so far as they reflect on the state of society today.

A defense of our pragmatist position

Our reply to the criticisms of the last chapter (Chapter 9: 'Social Theory for the Twenty First-Century') is as follows.

- (1) Susen would like to know on what basis we think that social theory is occupying such a central place in the humanities and social sciences. The answer is obvious, as we discussed in the text. The post-positivist era of the last three decades has provided a central space for social theory in a variety of ways. Academic disciplines such as geography and international relations, which were previously under-theorized, have increasingly taken on board theoretical developments. For better or worse, social theory has become the vehicle through which innovations – new ideas or metaphors – circulate, moving from one discipline to another. In that process, scholars in a variety of disciplines and sub-disciplines are able to communicate with each other through the lens of social theory. The idea of 'heterogeneous networks', for example, has moved from science studies to a variety of other disciplines, bringing different fields in contact with each other.

This is not to say that social theory has an equally prominent role across the humanities and social sciences, with, for instance, economics and social psychology remaining relatively immune to theoretical import beyond a limited range. There are also national variations, with, say, American political science, in comparison to its European counterparts, less open to theoretical contributions other than rational choice theory.

Also, there is no guarantee that social theory, as we defined it here, will continue to occupy this central position in the future, and indeed it will be dependent on a range of factors, amongst which are the relative strength of empiricist approaches and the particular sources of research funding.

- (2) Susen wants to know why we claim that the precise role of social theory in empirical research has become less certain. He also erroneously believes that this contradicts our view that social theory occupies a prominent place. The precise role of social theory in research is now less clear than, say, in the middle of the twentieth century, not in the least because of a range of philosophical developments. In the 1950s the deductive-nomological and the falsificationist model presented a neat framework for thinking about the relationship between theory and research – one which put the social sciences on a par with their natural science counterparts – but this model has come under considerable criticism from Rom Harré and others. The critical realist alternative, which gained momentum in the 1980s and infiltrated in particular sociology, has been undermined by the arguments presented by post-foundationalist philosophies, like neo-pragmatism (Baert 2005). More generally, whereas previously empirical research was conceived as an equivocal testing device – an empirical court of arbitration, corroborating or refuting theories – the recognition of the theory-laden nature of observations (and therefore their fallibility) has made this view increasingly untenable.
- (3) Susen questions to what extent social theory manages to set the agenda for what is studied and how it is studied. There are plenty of cases that exemplify our position. One obvious example is Beck's risk theory, which was first introduced in social theory but has influenced a variety of fields, ranging from geography to sociology. Likewise, Foucault's theoretical reflections on power had a profound impact on, for instance, history and anthropology. As for the example of the public sphere, we disagree with Susen and consider Habermas's contribution initially to have been a theoretical one, at least in the way in which we define social theory at the beginning of our book.
- (4) Susen holds that we do not exhibit enough 'critical reflection' of the 'Anglocentric' nature of social theory. Whilst it is true that there is no equivalent place for, say, the terms *théorie sociale* or *Sozialtheorie* in Francophone and Germanophone academic institutions, the latter do exhibit interest in the particular questions which this book addresses and indeed several of the key authors discussed are non-Anglo-Saxon.
- (5) Susen poses the question of who subscribes to the deductive-nomological and who endorses the representational model. The answer should be obvious. As we defined the deductive-nomological model broadly, the list of followers would include not only those who endorse Hempel's views but also Popper's and Lakatos's respective positions. As for the representational

model, most critical realists or structuralist-inclined researchers, for instance, would hold onto this view. Contrary to what Susen asserts, both perspectives have been dominant during substantial periods of the twentieth century. We were right to argue that the Hempel–Popper view gave way to the critical realist perspective, which in turn led to the backlash which Susen briefly mentioned. We saw it as our task to develop a non-representational perspective which does not succumb to some of the relativist traps, hence our interest in pragmatism (see also Baert, Weinberg, and Mottier 2011).

- (6) Susen argues that we conflate hermeneutics and phenomenology. We do not. We mention phenomenology at some point in relation to hermeneutics because some of Gadamer's concerns stem from an engagement with Husserl's phenomenology.
- (7) Susen criticizes us for courting epistemic relativism. We do not. The quotations he uses prove our point: they have nothing to do with epistemic relativism. In short, the first quote asserts that whether or not an intellectual intervention counts as novel depends on the context in which it arises, whilst the second quote points out that we do not learn anything new by routinely imposing a well-known theoretical format onto an empirical setting. Neither claim has any connection with epistemic relativism. If anything, our pragmatist position is incompatible with epistemic relativism (see also Baert, Weinberg, and Mottier 2011).
- (8) Susen maintains that there is not much left of science if we abandon its mission to disclose causal mechanisms of which the people affected are unaware. We disagree with Susen's reconstruction of our argument. It is perfectly possible to make empirically based claims about causal mechanisms, and indeed some of those mechanisms might not be acknowledged by the people involved. What we are arguing is something different. We contend that any attempt to establish procedures for what counts as 'scientific' is bound to fail, and any such attempt is a poor starting-point for thinking about the methodology of the social sciences. Susen argues that 'invaluable insights can be gained from the search for universally valid forms of knowledge', but the notion of a 'universally valid form of knowledge' is precisely the type of language that we try to avoid for reasons explained in the book and elsewhere. There is no neutral algorithm which resides prior or external to the conversation between scientists (and prior or external to their practice) which would enable them to establish the methods to adopt. From a pragmatist perspective, rather than referring to a putatively transcendental logic, our epistemic terms of reference are multiple and change along with the changing conditions under which they are applied. This pragmatist position, however, does not preclude the possibility of establishing causal links. The two are very different things.
- (9) Susen asserts that we do not say anything substantially new, but his examples are exceptionally misleading. For instance, he cites two characteristics which, we claim, most pragmatists share: the dualism between theory and practice and the mirror view of knowledge. Both examples are particularly misleading because these characteristics were meant to set the scene; they do not make up the core of our argument about a new philosophy of social research. Leaving that aside, those two features are not as commonplace as Susen makes out: mainstream social research, for instance, maintains the

separation between theory and practice, whilst most critical realists somehow subscribe to the spectator theory of knowledge. Likewise, Susen belittles our argument that presuppositions are a precondition for knowledge acquisition, claiming that so many others have argued this before. Some might have done, but this particular argument is a stepping stone to our more distinctive claim that social researchers should use the encounter with difference so as to reconsider the very presuppositions that are the precondition of knowledge acquisition in the first place.

- (10) Susen's accusations about what we said or did not say about culture are baffling. He says we should have defined 'culture', but the notion of culture as such does not particularly feature in our argument. Moreover, contrary to what Susen suggests, we never wrote that cultures necessarily change once confronted with 'unsettling experiences', nor did we deny the significance of power or cultural capital. Furthermore, we never denied the complexity of multicultural identities, but then we did not advocate them in the first place. Our position relates to the philosophy of social science, not political theory: we argued for the primacy of self-referential knowledge acquisition. Susen's suggestion that this type of research would bring about an identity crisis seems far-fetched.
- (11) Susen holds that the different components of our hermeneutically inspired pragmatism overlap. This is not the case. 'Conceptualization' refers to the process of making discursive a number of presuppositions; 'critique' is the process of critically scrutinizing these presuppositions; edification involves people becoming aware of the locality and specificity of what they took to be universal; and imagination comes into play when we are able to envisage other socio-political scenarios. Yes, the four components are related, but no, they are clearly distinct.
- (12) There is an element of truth in Susen's allegation that, for all their talk about practical engagement and dialogue, most pragmatists operate within intellectual circles just like anti-pragmatists do. This applies to us too. However, this does not undermine the arguments we put forward about social research. Indeed, we welcome various attempts to promote the co-production of knowledge, whereby researchers and those who are being researched collaborate in the making of knowledge, whether under the banner of public sociology or actor-network theory.
- (13) We concur to a certain extent with Susen that we exhibit a 'lack of commitment to first-order normative standards that may transcend cultural specificity' and an 'unwillingness to defend a set of universalizable values and context-transcending standards, let alone a philosophical program *explicitly* based on normative foundations'. We agree to the extent that we emphasized in our text that we, or anyone else for that matter, are not in a position to provide a neutral algorithm which would enable us to make judgments of this kind, and any attempt to do so has proved to be unproductive. This position is not 'insufficiently ambitious' but a recognition of what is possible and what is not. It is not entirely clear to us what, according to Susen, those 'first-order standards' are supposed to be. Towards the very end, he seems to put his unreconstructed Enlightenment cards on the table when he writes about the 'species-constitutive and the species-empowering potentials that have allowed us to raise ourselves out of

the natural world by creating, and immersing ourselves within, the social world'. However, for all its lip service to Habermas and the nostalgic throwback it entails, even that sentence does not say a great deal.

Notes on contributors

Patrick Baert is a fellow of Selwyn College and reader in social theory at the University of Cambridge. Amongst his recent publications are *Social Theory in the Twentieth Century and Beyond* (with Filipe Carreira da Silva; Polity, 2010) and *Philosophy of the Social Sciences: Towards Pragmatism* (Polity, 2005). He also co-edited the volumes *Conflict, Citizenship and Civil Society* (Routledge, 2010) and *Politics of Knowledge* (Routledge, 2012). His current research explores the intellectual landscape of the 1940s in France.

Filipe Carreira da Silva is research assistant professor at the Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon, and a senior member of Wolfson College, Cambridge. His current research interests revolve around sociological theory and citizenship studies. In particular, he maintains an interest in social and political theories, namely the 'multiple modernities' approach, the model of deliberative democracy, and the 'historicism versus presentism' methodological debate. He has written several articles and books on classical and contemporary sociological theories, including *G.H. Mead: A Critical Introduction* (Polity, 2007) and *Mead and Modernity: Science, Selfhood, and Democratic Politics* (Lexington, 2008).

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