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# **Following the footprints of the 'postmodern turn':**

## **A reply to Gregor McLennan**

***Simon Suseñ***

I am enormously grateful to Gregor McLennan for commenting on my book *The 'postmodern turn' in the social sciences* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). Furthermore, I am indebted to the editors of the *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology* for providing me with the opportunity to respond to his remarks. In my Reply, I shall focus on some central issues raised by McLennan in his thoughtful review article.<sup>1</sup>

### **1. Common ground**

Let me stress at the outset that, although McLennan's critical comments and the cynical undertone of large parts of his review article may create the impression that the differences between our respective positions are profound, it seems to me that, upon reflection, we agree on most of the key issues in question. Arguably, the most significant common ground between us concerns our defence of the *progressive* dimensions of modernity in general and of the Enlightenment in particular. Characterising '[my] own preferred stance' as 'a kind of *qualified modernism*' (italics added), McLennan explicitly states that, overall, he finds my own perspective – as developed and advocated in Chapter 6 of my book – 'intelligent and persuasive'. As he rightly asserts, 'broadly speaking it reflects the majority mindset in social theory'. It must be emphasised, however, that the detailed underpinnings of this normative outlook are far from homogenous and differ substantially between various attempts to expose both the empowering and the disempowering features of the 'modes of social life or organisation which emerged in Europe from about the seventeenth century onwards and which subsequently became more or less worldwide in their influence'<sup>2</sup>.

In other words, critical social theory needs to face up to the deep *ambivalence* of modernity – that is, it needs to shed light on both its *dark* and its *bright* dimensions. The *disempowering* facets of modernity ‘emanate from the quest for domination, epitomized in the historical impact of *instrumental reason*’ (Susen, 2015, p. 17, italics in original). By contrast, the *empowering* aspects of modernity, whilst contributing to the emancipation of human actors, ‘can be uncovered by *critical reason*’ (Susen, 2015, p. 17, italics in original). The former ‘are intimately associated with variations of control – such as power, authority, order, discipline, obedience, enclosure, and heteronomy – and materialize themselves in social processes of domination, regulation, exploitation, alienation, fragmentation, exclusion, and discrimination’ (Susen, 2015, p. 17). The latter are ‘expressed in Enlightenment ideals – such as progress, tolerance, liberty, equality, solidarity, dignity, sovereignty, and autonomy – and manifest themselves in social processes of liberation, self-determination, and unification’ (Susen, 2015, p. 17). It is this sort of ‘qualified modernism’<sup>3</sup> upon whose cogency and usefulness McLennan and I appear to agree.

Let me, in the remainder of this Reply, address some of the critical points that McLennan makes in his review article.

## 2. Purpose

In the opening paragraph of his review article, McLennan characterises the overall *purpose* of my book as follows:

One claim to distinction is Susen’s intention to provide the sort of *comprehensive thematic mapping* that will get beneath the level of more accentuated or descriptive approaches to postmodernism, which tend to be couched in terms of individual thinkers, selective issues, and individual disciplines. The second notable feature is that Susen offers his own *considered verdict* on the central contentions, whilst decently striving to keep this somewhat apart from, and subsequent to, his more open-ended *exegeses and exemplifications*. The purpose is thus somewhat *encyclopaedic* in a traditional sense (italics added).

As should be obvious to the attentive reader, McLennan contradicts himself in this passage. The purpose of my book is not ‘somewhat *encyclopaedic* in a traditional sense’ (italics added), since – as McLennan perceptively observes – it aims to reach ‘*beneath* the level of more accentuated or descriptive approaches to postmodernism’ (italics added), whilst offering a ‘*considered verdict*’ (italics added) on, and hence making

an informed *judgement* about, crucial assertions, positions, and arguments endorsed by defenders of postmodern thought. My study is *not* intended to be merely descriptive, let alone exhaustive or conclusive.<sup>4</sup> Rather, it provides an *aspect-oriented*, *analytical*, and *critical* account of the impact that the ‘postmodern turn’ has had, and continues to have, on the contemporary social sciences.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. Distance

McLennan rightly states that, although my book offers an *interdisciplinary* overview of the impact of the ‘postmodern turn’ on the social sciences, it fails to consider the pivotal role played by one discipline: *economics*. Surely, one may add other social-scientific disciplines to the list – notably, anthropology, social psychology, and criminology. In fact, if one expands the explorative territory to the humanities more widely, then literary theory, art, art history, architecture, and cultural studies would be obvious candidates. Granted, the analysis of the five broad fields of enquiry covered in my book – that is, (I) epistemology, (II) social research methodology, (III) sociology, (IV) historiography, and (V) politics – is far from complete. One may put forward different arguments as to why some areas of investigation deserve, or do not deserve, to be prioritised over others. Let us, in this context, turn our attention to the following assessment made by McLennan:

The chapters proceed by identifying a core conceptual ‘turn’ that postmodern challenges to the reigning modernist assumptions have triggered – thus, the relativist turn in epistemology, the interpretive turn in methodology, the cultural turn in sociology, the contingent turn in historiography, and the autonomous turn in politics. This architecture works reasonably well, and the various domains and turns are knowledgeably developed.

This may sound like a pedantic point, but it is striking that, in his review article, McLennan does *not* pick up on the fact that, in my book, the aforementioned paradigmatic shifts are referred to in inverted commas: (I) the ‘relativist turn’, (II) the ‘interpretive turn’, (III) the ‘cultural turn’, (IV) the ‘contingent turn’, and (V) the ‘autonomous turn’. The same applies to the major paradigmatic transition under which these shifts are subsumed: the formulation ‘postmodern turn’ appears in inverted commas throughout the study, including in its title.<sup>6</sup> At first glance, this remark may appear to be a matter of academic hair-splitting and intellectualist quibbling. It is worth emphasising, however, that the aforementioned

inverted commas – largely ignored by McLennan in his review article – are meant to express a *critical distance* between the author and the paradigmatic turns in question, indicating that their existence, let alone their validity, must not be taken for granted.

## 4. Failure (?)

The most central critical remark made by McLennan in his assessment of my study is the following assertion: ‘I do not think that the book ultimately succeeds.’ Obviously, after years of hard work on what seemed to be an interminable research project, an author does not wish to be confronted with this kind of harsh evaluation.<sup>7</sup> For the sake of clarity, let us discern the principal claims that McLennan makes in relation to this – rather discouraging – conclusion.

### 4.1. Readership

A noteworthy problem that McLennan mentions in this regard concerns the question of the book’s intended *readership*:

The first major problem is that it is hard to see exactly whom this dense and overlapping series of accounts is aimed at, or who is going to be greatly motivated by it. And with a book dealing with postmodernism, this can hardly be a secondary or innocent question.

In addition, McLennan complains that neither Bryan S. Turner, ‘in his prefatory praise for the book’, nor I, ‘over the course of a 40-page introduction’, ‘bother to identify who *the typical reader* might be, or in what ways they might consider themselves edified’ (italics added, quotation modified). In this context, McLennan draws attention to the genre known as ‘rhetoric of enquiry’, which posits that that textual productions ‘should be appreciated on the basis of whom they might be *for* before we decide exactly what they are *about* or how *good* they are in some vacant general sense’ (italics in original).

The question that I ask myself in response to this objection is *why* the profile of the addressee should be made explicit. When you get dressed in the morning, should you make it obvious *for whom* and/or *why* you are putting on a particular set of clothes? Obviously, the answer is ‘no’. Perhaps, given the commodified nature of the academic publishing industry in the twenty-first century, one might not be surprised by the fact that even astute and intellectually autonomous scholars, such as

McLennan, appear to take the view that authors should specify at what kind of readership their books are aimed. It seems, then, that selling books is not dissimilar to vending toys: market strategists need to know which particular groups of people possess the cognitive resources necessary for them to find the item that they are buying both appropriate and interesting.

Should we preface academic books with descriptions of those who may be interested in them, classifying suitable readership groups in terms of key sociological variables (such as class, gender, ethnicity, age, ability, ideological affiliation, disciplinary profile, and educational background)? Of course, I am being facetious – but, actually, this is a serious point, for it would be silly, and potentially patronising, ‘to identify who the typical reader might be’. Creative writers – who are immersed in specific epistemic and stylistic horizons, which can be as diverse as academic research, fiction, or poetry – may have a particular readership for their works in mind; there is no categorically applicable reason, however, why it should be considered a ‘must’ to make the addressees of their outputs explicit. Such kind of performative utilitarianism would kill off the imaginative spirit that is essential to adventurous modes of enquiry, which refuse to be dictated by rigid parameters of clearly defined target audiences.

#### **4.2. Familiarity**

Another significant problem that McLennan discusses in this context relates to the *familiarity* of the book’s key theme. In relation to the question of suitable readership, McLennan contends that ‘[t]he most obvious collective candidate is the set of peers and teachers of *social theory* in this academic area’ (italics added). McLennan goes on to make fun of Zygmunt Bauman’s blurb that ‘the rest of us’ – which, in his eyes, implies ‘most of us’ – ‘now have some catching up to do’. To this provocative statement, he objects that ‘this is a *very* familiar topic field’ (italics in original); thus, in his opinion, there is no need for yet another book on this subject. McLennan appears to forget, however, that the fact that something is *familiar* to us does not mean that we *understand* it. Indeed, it is one of the basic insights of sociological investigation that familiarity is a tricky affair, since it tends to give us the illusionary impression that we comprehend something merely because it is known to us. Yet, familiarity based on taken-for-grantedness is by no means a guarantee of critical understanding. Just as we must not confuse practical knowledge (‘know how’) with theoretical knowledge (‘know that’), we must not assume that we can grasp the constitution and development of a

particular phenomenon simply because we are, or at least appear to be, familiar with it. It is true that, as illustrated by my study<sup>8</sup>, countless books and articles grappling with the concept of ‘the postmodern’ have been written, but this is in no way a reliable indicator of the fact that we – as critical researchers – have reached an accurate understanding of its complexity.

#### **4.3. Systematicity**

A further problem that McLennan discusses in this context relates to the *systematicity* of the book’s analysis.

Susen’s book at least now becomes *the most systematic treatment available*; but down these well-worn tracks *it is not clear that what we are in need of is greater systematicity, or that the latter brings notably greater insight* (italics added).

Given the arguably ‘anti-systematic’ nature of postmodern thought, the aim of providing a systematic account of its numerous facets, premises, and propositions was one of the most challenging aspects of my undertaking. Undoubtedly, if this task is (mis-) understood as the narrow goal of offering a methodical overview solely for the sake of systematicity, then it defeats the point – and, indeed, undermines the underlying rationale – of my entire project. If such an ambition is driven merely by the scholastic attempt to develop a pristine edifice of conceptual constructions, embedded in a descriptivist inventory that is tantamount to a pedestrian *état des lieux*, then we do not succeed in taking the debate to a higher level of epistemic insight. To the degree, however, that the book – as indicated by those who emphatically endorsed it – has delivered an unprecedentedly methodical, fine-grained, and multi-layered account of the impact of the ‘postmodern turn’ on the social sciences, it is hardly accurate to dismiss its intellectual merits simply by asserting that its ‘greater systematicity’ has failed to result in ‘greater insight’.

I leave it up to each reader to form a judgement on whether or not my book has succeeded in accomplishing this ambitious task, which – owing to the massive scale of the literature available on postmodern thought – is far from straightforward. Irrespective of the conclusions one may reach in relation to this issue, it seems only fair to remind McLennan of the fact that my study is based on a multifaceted, comprehensive, and critical *analysis* of the impact of the ‘postmodern turn’ on the social sciences. As such, it confronts its readers with ample evidence in support of the view that postmodern thought constitutes an omnipresent albeit largely implicit – feature of social-scientific enquiry in the early twenty-first century.

#### **4.4. Originality**

Another problem that arises when confronted with McLennan's assessment of my book concerns the issue of *originality*. I cannot help but think that, in light of the – largely unfounded – accusation that the book contains no major original insights, McLennan has not read the entire study properly or has simply decided to take out his own boredom with 'postmodernism' on the messenger (or both).

Consider, for instance, my book's section on 'The Arts'<sup>9</sup>, which seeks not only to compare and to contrast, but also, more importantly, to combine (i) objectivist, (ii) normativist, and (iii) subjectivist – or, if one prefers, (i) realist, (ii) constructivist, and (iii) perspectivist – conceptions of aesthetic experience. I have not come across any such account in the vast literature on postmodernism, although I would certainly welcome any commentator – including McLennan – to demonstrate *not only* that the same, or at least a very similar, approach has been developed elsewhere by someone else *but also* that it is futile. As I have sought to illustrate in my book, the tripartite distinction between (i) objectivist/realist, (ii) normativist/constructivist, and (iii) subjectivist/perspectivist conceptions of human existence – which is, admittedly, based on a well-known (Kantian-Marxian-Weberian-Habermasian) distinction between the (i) objective, (ii) normative, and (iii) subjective components of human life forms<sup>10</sup> – has profound implications for our understanding of the human condition. To the extent that we are *simultaneously* situated in (i) objective, (ii) normative, and (iii) subjective realms of existence, which constitute the ontological cornerstones of our lifeworlds, the challenge consists in combining and cross-fertilising (i) objectivist/realist, (ii) normativist/constructivist, and (iii) subjectivist/perspectivist conceptions of human immersion, rather than portraying them as mutually exclusive. It would go beyond the scope of this Reply to elucidate the complexity of the aforementioned argument; the fact that McLennan has failed to mention – let alone to grapple with – this central part of my study, however, confirms my suspicion that he regards my book as little more than an encyclopaedic summary of obsolete and '*very familiar*' debates (*italics in original*).

As both ordinary actors *and* reflexive scientists, we mobilise (i) objectivist/realist, (ii) normativist/constructivist, and (iii) subjectivist/perspectivist presuppositions when describing, analysing, interpreting, explaining, and/or making value judgements about the constitution, the functioning, and the development of social reality, or of particular aspects of social reality (see Susen, 2015, p. 5). In this context,

five areas of philosophical enquiry are particularly noteworthy: knowledge (epistemology), being (ontology/metaphysics), argument (logic), morality (ethics), and aesthetic forms (aesthetics). All of them can be conceptualised in (i) objectivist/realist, (ii) normativist/constructivist, and (iii) subjectivist/perspectivist terms; more importantly, and as I have shown in my book in relation to aesthetics, all of them can be conceptualised by combining these three epistemic perspectives with one another. Granted, the far-reaching implications (and complications) of such a radical epistemic move have, at best, been tentatively anticipated or, at worst, been cursorily simplified in my study. Arguably, another book will have to be written to do justice to the complexity of such as macro-theoretic endeavour. *The 'postmodern turn' in the social sciences* contains at least a *Grundriß* – that is, a sketchy outline – of this project. This, however, is not acknowledged by McLennan, who, when conveying his judgement, prefers to prioritise *form* (structure, systematicity, and length) over *content* (genuine insights). The aforementioned issue is only one example. I could provide several others, but, due to constraints of length, I shall not include them here.

#### **4.5. Justification**

Another problem to which McLennan draws attention concerns the alleged *lack of justification* for the book's 'strategy'. In this regard, the following passage is crucial:

[...] everyone knows this whole epochal slab of theoretical discussion has moved on, even if amorphously. True, most of the 'beyond the impasse' currents flowing today are still, as Susen insists, somewhat haunted by the 'spectre' of the unavoidably Manichean 'debate'. But that is insufficient justification for the strategy adopted in this book, which is chiefly to try to re-run the whole thing again with minimum reference to updates, new contributions, and the changes of heart and tone that come simply with the passage of time. Whether it is a matter of complexity theory, the 'new empiricism', ANT-style questionings of 'the social', varieties of critical pragmatism, restless attempts to relativise without relativism, postsecular and postcolonial über-challenges, or the partial revival of Marxism, fresh angles and motives are continually being added, and they are not reducible to 'modernism versus postmodernism'.

Again, each reader will have to judge whether or not I have provided sufficient justification for the conceptual and methodological strategy developed in my book. As should be clear to the attentive reader, the

'Manichean' oppositions examined in each chapter are embedded in the architectural opposition between 'modern' and 'postmodern', along with the underlying tension between the former's emphasis on 'relative determinacy' and the latter's concern with 'radical indeterminacy'. It will be up to my critics to give a verdict on whether or not my enquiry has made a strong enough case for the distinction between 'modern' and 'postmodern' based on the tension between 'determinacy' and 'indeterminacy'. Yet, there is not much, if any, room for confirming the validity of McLennan's assertion that the quality of my study suffers from a 'minimum reference to updates, new contributions, and the changes of heart and tone that come simply with the passage of time'. As a thorough look at the bibliography of my book will prove, it contains numerous references to precisely the updates, new contributions, and wind changes that McLennan has in mind. Indeed, it is ironic that not just *some* but – with one exception – *all* of the approaches mentioned by McLennan *do* appear in my book:

- complexity theory<sup>11</sup>;
- the 'new empiricism'<sup>12</sup>;
- ANT-style questionings of 'the social'<sup>13</sup>;
- varieties of critical pragmatism<sup>14</sup>;
- restless attempts to relativise without relativism<sup>15</sup>;
- postsecular<sup>16</sup> and postcolonial<sup>17</sup> über-challenges;
- the partial revival of Marxism<sup>18</sup>.

I suppose this is what footballers would call an *own goal*. The approaches that, according to McLennan, have been covered with minimum – if any – degree of seriousness in my book have, in fact, *all* been included and represented in an extensive list of bibliographic references. To be sure, nowhere in the book do I – as McLennan erroneously asserts – contend that these perspectives, and the debates that have arisen around them, are '*reducible* to "modernism versus postmodernism"' (italics added). All I affirm in relation to these approaches is that their emergence, as well as their presuppositional constitution and development, cannot be properly understood without taking into account the impact of postmodern thought on the social sciences.

McLennan's following comment is another proof of the fact that he failed to read crucial sections of my study with sufficient attention:

Critical discourse analysis, for example, is portrayed as coming on to the scene very much as a postmodern method, thus being 'fundamentally different' from modernistic ideology critique (p. 73). But key authors in CDA mode do not see it that way, explicitly having sought, after the postmodern hit, to retain some philosophically realist elements of structural analysis whilst simultaneously accepting the force of the discursive-linguistic turn.

As I explicitly state in relation to 'critical discourse analysis' (CDA),

[...] it would be inappropriate to give the – misleading – impression that all forms of discourse analysis are, implicitly or explicitly, 'postmodern'. As this chapter seeks to illustrate, however, it makes sense to conceive of discourse analysis as a research method whose theoretical presuppositions and practical implications are indicative of the *paradigmatic shift from the search for relative determinacy to the emphasis on radical indeterminacy in current social-scientific debates and controversies*. In short, the rise of discourse analysis is one among other symptoms of the far-reaching impact of postmodern thought on the contemporary social sciences (Susem, 2015, p. 65; italics in original).

#### **4.6. (Post-) Positivism**

In relation to my chapter on epistemology (Chapter 1), McLennan expresses serious doubts about the validity of my contention that '*uncompromising opposition to positivist approaches in the social sciences lies at the heart of postmodern theories of knowledge*'<sup>19</sup>. He claims that this assertion is misleading in at least three respects:

This is not wrong as such, but it misleads the naïve reader in at least three ways, because post-positivism in philosophy, whether in the analytical mainstream or on the critical fringe, emerged prior to, and independently of, the tide of postmodernism; (b) because many post-positivist thinkers retain a minimally realist commitment, whereas the most distinctive conceptual component of strong postmodernism is anti-realism; and (c) because serious postmodernists do not seek to provide *alternative theories of knowledge*, they reject epistemology altogether (italics in original).

Let me, in my brief response, draw attention to the following:

- (a) It may well be true that post-positivism entered the scene prior to, and independently of, the tide of postmodernism. Indeed, as indicated in my study, the same applies to numerous other ‘post-isms’ (see Susen, 2015, p. 18). The point is, however, to recognise that the postmodern attack on positivist approaches is central to postmodern conceptions of knowledge (and ‘anti-knowledge’).
- (b) Nowhere do I suggest that the terms ‘postpositivism’ and ‘postmodernism’ should be used interchangeably, as McLennan erroneously implies in his criticism. He is, in my view, right to stress that anti-realism is a constitutive feature of postmodern accounts of knowledge. This does not mean, however, that all thinkers whose names are – rightly or wrongly – associated with the label ‘postmodernism’ deny the existence of external and/or internal realities.
- (c) It is an exaggeration to affirm, as McLennan does in his review article, that ‘serious postmodernists’, rather than seeking to provide alternative theories of knowledge, reject epistemology altogether. I wonder if McLennan could name at least a handful of ‘serious postmodernists’ to whom this statement applies. There would be no point in trying to identify, and to problematise, the key assumptions underlying postmodern conceptions of epistemology (Chapter 1) if ‘serious postmodernists’ rejected epistemology altogether.<sup>20</sup>

The aforementioned objections, although they may have entertainment value based on irony and rhetorical provocation, do not stand up to scrutiny.

#### **4.7. The ‘cultural turn’**

According to McLennan, my study suffers from an ‘*unreflecting acceptance* in Chapter 3 of the idea that there was a *decisive “cultural turn” in sociology* (as though sociology has been anything other than mainly culturalist)’ (italics added). This criticism results from a reductive reading of Chapter 3. My book conceives of the ‘cultural turn’ as *one* of the most important paradigmatic transitions that have taken place within, and considerably shaped the development of, sociology in recent decades. Moreover, it maintains that the ‘cultural turn’ is intimately intertwined with the ‘postmodern turn’. It does *not* posit, however, that the ‘cultural turn’ has been *the only* significant paradigmatic transition in contemporary sociology, let alone the only one linked to the ‘postmodern turn’. Had McLennan read my book more

carefully, he would have realised that Chapter 3 contains a detailed section (Susem, 2015, pp. 96–101) on numerous paradigmatic developments in contemporary sociology. In this section, the following areas of sociological investigation are covered: (a) *cultural sociology/sociology of culture*, (b) *economic sociology*, (c) *digital sociology*, (d) *critical sociology*, and (e) *political sociology*. I argue that all of them are relevant to the ‘cultural turn’, in the sense that the concept of culture plays a pivotal role in each of these fields of enquiry. Nowhere do I posit, however, that they can be reduced to the ‘cultural turn’ or that all of sociology has gone entirely ‘culturalist’. I am afraid that, once again, my argument is more nuanced than McLennan would like to admit.

#### **4.8. History**

Another point that deserves attention is McLennan’s accusation that Chapter 4 suffers from the ‘violently simplistic summation of “modern intellectual thought” [...] as the conviction that “the course of history is determined by necessity”’ (italics in original). As I spell out in the book, the distinction between ‘modern’ and ‘postmodern’ is a controversial one, and so are the numerous conceptual oppositions that are rightly or wrongly associated with it – in relation to epistemology, social research methodology, sociology, historiography, and politics. Of course, it would be utterly simplistic to posit that *all* of modern intellectual thought is based on the assumption that the course of history is determined by necessity. The aforementioned inverted commas – which McLennan, in his own interpretation, ignores – are a way of expressing a critical distance between the author and the sets of presuppositions underlying the discursive construction of the binary separation between ‘modern’ and ‘postmodern’ forms of analysis. Hence, it is not ‘[my] own depiction of the modernist view of history’ that is ‘overstated’, but the postmodern depictions – or, rather, caricatures – of it. Chapter 4 provides an account of key paradigmatic positions in contemporary historiography that – whilst being organised in accordance with the crucial, but admittedly controversial, division between ‘modern’ and ‘postmodern’ approaches – is far more fine-grained than McLennan is willing to acknowledge.

#### **4.9. Determinacy/indeterminacy**

As is made explicit on a number of occasions throughout the book, the ‘postmodern turn’ can be conceived of as 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.<sup>21</sup> Challenging the validity of this contention, McLennan asserts that ‘a moment’s thought reveals this claim itself as at least relatively deterministic, with the free-floating Platonic take on ideas looking much more *radically ungrounded*’ (italics in original) and that, consequently, ‘Susen’s keystone formulation loosens and cracks’. As an example, McLennan refers to *globalisation*, which, according to my study, postmodern sociologists tend to regard as ‘one of the central processes shaping the contemporary world’<sup>22</sup>, despite the fact that it represents, in his words, ‘exactly the sort of epochal, *structurationist* way of thinking that is haughtily scorned by the evangelists of lightning-bolt flashes of uncanny illumination’ (italics added). Once again, McLennan ignores the fact that my study draws attention to this paradox in particular and to the contradictory nature of postmodern thought in general.<sup>23</sup>

McLennan is culpable of a similar misrepresentation of my argument when affirming that ‘Marxists who have taken the cultural turn are bracketed to that extent as being on the postmodern side of things’. In this context, McLennan makes reference to my contention that ‘contemporary political sociologists – including Marxist ones – are keen to explore various degrees of indeterminacy that are present in highly differentiated societies’ (Susen, 2015, p. 101). McLennan’s claim that ‘the investigation of “degrees of indeterminacy” [...] amounts to *exactly the same thing* as the investigation of degrees of relative determinacy’ (italics added) is untenable. The paradigmatic shift from the latter to the former is far from insignificant, since it implies that within contemporary sociology – including its Marxist, neo-Marxist, and post-Marxist currents – there has been a decisive shift away from the attempt to uncover patterns of relative determinacy towards recognising the actual or potential complexity of all material and symbolic forms of existence in terms of their radical indeterminacy.

To be clear, this is not to posit that, *ontologically* speaking, there are no patterns of determinacy or that, *methodologically* speaking, it is impossible to identify and to examine patterns of determinacy. This is to concede, however, that reductionist approaches, notably those embedded in determinist and/or monocausal explanatory frameworks, enjoy far less epistemic credibility and ideological legitimacy in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries than they did previously. Irrespective of whether one wishes to conceive of this paradigmatic shift in ‘late modern’ or ‘postmodern’ terms, and even if one acknowledges, as I do in Chapter 6,

that the scientifically motivated concern with different forms and different degrees of indeterminacy long predates the jargon of ‘the postmodern’ as well as the alleged advent of ‘postmodernity’, it is difficult to deny that, in terms of both breadth and depth, the sustained engagement with different forms and different degrees of indeterminacy constitutes an essential feature of most contemporary variants of rigorous social-scientific enquiry. It is ironic, then, that McLennan states that the aforementioned issue stands for ‘something that in the case of politics and ideology Marxists of different stripes have been busy addressing since the very outset of their tradition’. In fact, had he read my discussions of Marx’s model of ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’<sup>24</sup> – as well as my critical remarks on this issue in Chapter 6<sup>25</sup> – more carefully, he would have realised that, in my book, this was precisely the argument I was making.

#### **4.10. ‘Modern’ vs. ‘postmodern’**

McLennan’s concluding paragraph is another example of his crude misrepresentation of the conceptual architecture of my book. My study is *not* intended to draw a clear-cut line between ‘the two “sides”’ – that is, between ‘the modern’ and ‘the postmodern’. Rather, it aims to demonstrate that their binary categorisation is itself deeply *problematic* to the extent that these two concepts reflect *ideal types*, constructed especially by those who, for the right or the wrong reasons, seek to separate the latter from the former. Thus, the presuppositional overlap between ‘modern’ and ‘postmodern’ accounts of epistemology, methodology, sociology, historiography, and politics is *not* simply a matter of ‘conceptual slipping and category breaching’, as McLennan erroneously suggests. Even less can it be reduced to a rhetorical exercise that obliges us to conceive of postmodernism ‘as the business of posing hard modernist questions to modernism itself, and leaving them hanging’. In a more fundamental sense, it represents a major theoretical and practical challenge that, if taken seriously, requires us to face up to the numerous paradigmatic changes that have shaped the development of the contemporary social sciences in a profound manner and whose multifaceted complexity can be grasped only by virtue of a fine-grained analysis of its implications and consequences.

In short, the critical examination of the impact of the ‘postmodern turn’ on the contemporary social sciences requires us not to grind through ‘necessarily wooden contrapositions [...] all again’, but, rather, to do justice to the complexity underlying the paradigmatic shift from the Enlightenment concern with *determinacy* to the post-Enlightenment engagement with *indeterminacy* – a significant transition that is irreducible

to a language game whose value is based on mere semantics and fancy rhetoric. Today, in the twenty-first century, the idea of a ‘qualified modernist position’ is inconceivable if those who seek to defend it fail to engage *critically and systematically* with ‘qualified postmodernism’ – that is, with both the obvious and the hidden traces that the presuppositional conglomerate known as ‘the postmodern turn’ has left not only in ordinary and intellectual imaginaries but also in contemporary social realities.

## Notes

1. Unless otherwise indicated, quoted passages in this Reply are taken from McLennan (2017).
2. Giddens (1990), p. 1. On Giddens’s conception of ‘modernity’, see Giddens (1990), esp. pp. 1–17 and 45–54. Cf. Outhwaite (2014).
3. On the concept of ‘qualified modernism’, see McLennan (2017).
4. On this point, see, for instance, Susen (2015), pp. 37 and 232.
5. On this point, see, for example, Susen (2015), pp. 232–233 and 278.
6. It is worth mentioning that the publishers, Palgrave Macmillan, would have preferred to *omit* the inverted commas in the title – probably because, from a commercial point of view, it makes sense to avoid cumbersome book titles, even in the field of academic publishing.
7. It should be noted that most of the other hitherto published reviews of my book are largely favourable in their assessment. See, for example: Burton (2015); Fach (2016); Feather (2016); Gane (2016); Hazelrigg (2016); Mele (2017); Miranda González (2016); Munslow (2016); Outhwaite (2016); Salinas (2016); Toews (2016). See also Susen (2016). In addition, references to *The ‘postmodern turn’ in the social sciences* can be found, for instance, in the following sources: Alanen (2016); Bachmann-Medick (2015/2016); Cordero (2017); How (2016), esp. Chapter 5; Jacobsen and Walklate (2017); Olsson (2016); Tamara (2016); Warde (2017); Visoka and Richmond (2016).
8. See Susen (2015), pp. 341–398.

9. See Susen (2015), pp. 101–103.
10. Cf. Susen (2007), pp. 23, 38–39, 43n25, 44n37, 75–88, 104–107, 115, 127n21, 275–302, and 307.
11. See, for instance: Chesters and Welsh (2005); Cilliers (1998); Lahire (1998); Susen (2010).
12. This ‘new empiricism’ is the exception. Yet, my book contains numerous passages and references that are related to this topic. On the ‘empirical turn’, see Susen (2015), p. 34. On the concept of ‘empiricism’, see Susen (2015), pp. 49, 68, 149, and 262. On the concept of ‘the empirical’, see Susen (2015), pp. 14, 21, 22, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 55, 56, 57, 58, 68, 77, 80, 86, 87, 93, 95, 125, 128, 130 131, 132, 139, 140, 144, 149, 207, 211, 215, 217, 234, 238, 242, 255, 260, 262, 263, 264, 268, and 280.
13. See, for instance: Latour (1990); Latour (2005); Sismondo (2004/2010); Wilding (2010).
14. See, for instance: Aboulafia, Bookman, and Kemp (2002); Alexander (2004); Apel (1979); Baert (2003); Baert (2005), pp. 126–145 and 146–169; Baert and da Silva (1998/2010), pp. 285–307; Baert and da Silva (2013); Baert and Turner (2007); Blokker (2011); Boltanski (1990); Boltanski (1999–2000); Boltanski (2009); Boltanski and Honneth (2009); Boltanski, Rennes, and Susen (2010); Boltanski and Thévenot (1991); Boltanski and Thévenot (1999); Celikates (2009); Margolis (1986/2007); McLaughlin and White (2012); Susen (2011); Susen (2012b); Susen (2013); Susen and Turner (2014).
15. See, for instance: Bourdieu (1999); Rorty (1982); Rorty (1985); Rorty (1989); Rorty (1991a); Rorty (1991d); Rorty (1991b); Rorty (1991c); Rorty (1997b); Rorty (1997a); Rorty (1998a); Rorty (1998b); Rorty (1979/2009).
16. See, for instance: Abeysekara (2008); Baker and Beaumont (2011); Blond (1997); Dostert (2006); Habermas (2008/2010); Hamilton (2008); Martin (1996); Mavelli (2012); Milbank (1992); Mohamed (2011); Molendijk, Beaumont, and Jedan (2010); Nynäs, Lassander, and Utriainen (2012); Rubinstein (2009); Smith and Whistler (2011); Vries and Sullivan (2006).
17. See, for instance: Amin-Khan (2012); Bhambra (2007); Brantlinger (2011); Carp (2010); Chatterjee (1993); Cornis-Pope (2012); Hoogvelt (1997).

18. See, for instance: Bonefeld, Gunn, and Psychopedis (1991); Bonefeld, Gunn, and Psychopedis (1992); Bonefeld, Gunn, Holloway, and Psychopedis (1995); Browne and Susen (2014), esp. pp. 224–229; Butler (1998); Callari and Ruccio (1996a); Callari and Ruccio (1996b); Callinicos (1989); Carver (1998); Cloud (1994); Cole (2003); Daly (1999); de Lara (1982); Eagleton (1995); Foster (1997/2006); Geras (1987); Hall (1977); Holloway (2002/2005); Holloway (2010); Holloway and Susen (2013), pp. 31–32 and 36; Kellner (1989b); Kellner (1989a); Laclau (1989); Laclau (1992); Laclau (1993); Laclau (1996); Laclau (2007); Laclau and Mouffe (1987) ; Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2001); Landry (2000); Malpas (2001), Chapters 8 and 9; Malpas (2005); McMahon (1999); Mouffe (1996); Mulhern (1997/2006); Rehmann (2004); Reitz (2004); Rundell (1990); Smart (1992), Chapter 6; Steiner (2008); Susen (2012a), esp. pp. 283–291; Torfing (1999); Vakaloulis (2001); Vester (2008); Weber (1995); Wolff (2004); Wood (1997/2006); Wood and Foster (1997/2006); Žižek (2000).
19. Susen (2015), p. 48 (italics in original); ‘lies’, rather than ‘lie’; McLennan misquotes me here.
20. On the relationship between *postmodernism* and *epistemology*, see, for example: Alexander (1992); Benhabib (1990); Clark (2006); Delanty (2000); Harding (1992); Inayatullah (1990); Jørgensen (2002); McKinley (2003); Nola and Irzik (2003); Rolfe (1997); Santos (2007); Susen (2015), esp. Chapter 1; Wersig (1993).
21. On this point, see Susen (2015), pp. 1, 9, 19, 39, 48, 59, 65, 66, 69, 72, 74, 82, 90, 92, 93, 104, 137, 138, 139, 166, 180, 233, 258, 264, 265, 268, and 278.
22. Susen (2015), pp. 128–129. See also McLennan (2017).
23. See Susen (2015), Chapter 6, esp. pp. 238–240.
24. See Susen (2015), pp. 90, 91, 97, 99, 100, 101, 265, 295n27, 298n31, and 300n110.
25. See Susen (2015), Chapter 6, esp. pp. 238–239 and 239–241.

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