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**Citation:** Susen, S. (2007). Introduction. In: Susen, S. (Ed.), *The Foundations of the Social: Between Critical Theory and Reflexive Sociology*. (pp. 17-30). Oxford, UK: Bardwell Press. ISBN 9781905622122

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EUROPEAN STUDIES IN SOCIAL THEORY

The  
**Foundations**  
of the  
**Social**  
Between Critical Theory  
and Reflexive Sociology



by  
*Simon Susen*



***The Foundations of the Social***

*To my parents*



EUROPEAN STUDIES IN SOCIAL THEORY

The  
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Between Critical Theory  
and Reflexive Sociology

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**B**

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Published by:

The Bardwell Press  
6 Bardwell Road  
Oxford OX2 6SW

[www.bardwell-press.co.uk](http://www.bardwell-press.co.uk)

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN-13: 978-1-905622-12-2

Typeset by The Bardwell Press, Oxford, UK  
Printed in Great Britain by Athenaeum Press Ltd, Gateshead

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## Introduction

This book is a study of the concept of the social in contemporary critical thought. The core assumption that underlies this study is that we can only identify solid grounds for social critique by identifying the grounds of the social itself. In order to demonstrate this, the book draws upon the work of Jürgen Habermas and Pierre Bourdieu. It explores the nature of the social not only by examining Habermasian critical theory and Bourdieusian reflexive sociology, but also by cross-fertilising them. Although these two approaches have already been compared in the literature<sup>1</sup>, their systematic integration has, to my knowledge, never been undertaken before. The analysis developed in this book seeks to show that some of the main shortcomings of each of these two approaches can be overcome by combining them. Inspired by the cross-fertilisation of Habermasian and Bourdieusian thought, the study proposes a tentative outline of a five-dimensional approach to the nature of the social.

The attempt to combine Habermasian and Bourdieusian social theory may at first glance appear surprising, given that the two accounts are generally regarded as two entirely different—or even diametrically opposed and incompatible—approaches to the nature of the social.<sup>2</sup>

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Here, by contrast, it will be argued that, despite the substantial differences that exist between Habermasian and Bourdieusian social theory, the two approaches share significant theoretical concerns. The study will show that both the similarities and the differences between the two approaches allow us not only to compare, but also to integrate them and thereby enrich our understanding of the social.

The predominant view in the literature is that Habermas and Bourdieu are worlds apart. Whereas Habermas's work stands—however controversially—in the neo-Marxist tradition of the Frankfurt School, Bourdieu's oeuvre cannot be dissociated from the Durkheimian tradition of French structuralism. Habermas can be considered a philosopher who seeks to reconstruct the communicative foundations of society, while Bourdieu can be conceived of as a sociologist who aims to uncover the relational nature of society. According to Habermas, language is primarily a medium of communication. According to Bourdieu, language is primarily a medium of social distinction. For Habermas, validity is a matter of rational acceptability. For Bourdieu, on the other hand, validity is a matter of social legitimacy. Whereas Habermas's anthropological optimism is based on the emancipatory force of communicative action, Bourdieu's anthropological pessimism is grounded in the reproductive force of homological action. These are only some of the main differences between Habermas and Bourdieu which are emphasised in the literature and which seem to suggest that any attempt to bring these two thinkers closer together will be fraught with difficulties.

This study seeks to demonstrate that, while Habermas and Bourdieu diverge in some substantial respects, they converge in some other, no less significant, respects. Both are firmly situated in the tradition of European social thought. Both are widely recognised as 'great social thinkers' of the late twentieth century. Both are concerned with the nature of the social. Both seek to propose a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding the nature of the social. Both regard language as a central component of the social. Both highlight that modern life is characterised by the increasing complexity of the social. Both are determined to overcome counterproductive divisions in the social sciences, rejecting one-sided accounts of the social. Both claim to uncover the structural grounds of social power and social domination. Both aim not only at the exploration, but also at the

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emancipation of society. Both are certain of the enlightening force of critical reflexivity, and both believe in the possibility and necessity of a critical social science. These are just some of the main commonalities between Habermas and Bourdieu, which are occasionally mentioned, yet hardly ever systematically elaborated upon in the literature. They nonetheless indicate that comparing and combining Habermasian and Bourdieusian social theory may be a viable and fruitful, albeit difficult and challenging, endeavour. This study is an attempt to show that such an undertaking allows us not only to open a critical dialogue between two hitherto almost completely dissociated approaches, but also to enrich our understanding of the social by drawing upon their complementary insights.

More specifically, this study centres on three main research questions, five main research objectives, and three main research claims.

(I) The three main research questions are:

1. What are the ontological foundations of the social? This question is concerned with the structural conditions that make social order possible.
2. What are the normative foundations of social critique? This question is concerned with the grounds on which we can justify our agreement or disagreement with the constitution of existing social relations.
3. What are the main features of a comprehensive critical social theory? This question is concerned with the elaboration of a systematic theoretical framework that allows us to understand the relationship between the nature of social order and the nature of social critique.

(II) The five main research objectives are:

1. to make a case for the reconstruction of Habermasian critical theory and Bourdieusian reflexive sociology;
2. to explore both the Habermasian and the Bourdieusian conception of the social;

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3. to identify the shortcomings of both the Habermasian ‘communicative approach’ and the Bourdieusian ‘homological approach’ to the social;
4. to overcome some of the most significant shortcomings of these two approaches by combining them; and
5. to propose an alternative, five-dimensional approach to the nature of the social.

(III) The three main research claims are:

1. that the Habermasian approach—which considers ‘communicative rationality’ to be the normative foundation of critical theory and ‘communicative action’ to be the ontological foundation of the social—is reductionist;
2. that the Bourdieusian approach—which considers ‘scientific reflexivity’ to be the normative foundation of reflexive sociology and ‘homological action’ to be the ontological foundation of the social—is equally reductionist; and
3. that a five-dimensional approach—which considers ‘createdness’, ‘reflexivity’, ‘situatedness’, ‘beyondness’, and ‘immersedness’ to be the normative foundations of critical theory and ‘labour’, ‘language’, ‘culture’, ‘desire’, and ‘experience’ to be the ontological foundations of the social—may be a viable alternative.

In order to confront the complexity of these research questions, objectives, and claims, the book is divided into three main parts. Part I examines one of the most controversial issues within contemporary social theory: the Habermasian paradigm shift in critical theory. Part II analyses an equally contentious issue within contemporary social theory: the Bourdieusian paradigm shift of reflexive sociology. Part III makes a case for the cross-fertilisation of Habermasian and Bourdieusian social theory and proposes a five-dimensional approach to the nature of the social.

It is no accident that the structure of the argument of Part I and Part II mirror each other. This similarity seeks to indicate that, despite the substantial differences that exist between Habermasian and Bourdieusian social theory, the two approaches share many significant

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theoretical concerns, which allow us to compare and combine them. Thus, both Part I and Part II are divided into four chapters. The first chapter and the fifth chapter explore the epistemological presuppositions of the two approaches. The second chapter and the sixth chapter look into the theoretical aporias which the two approaches seek to overcome. The third chapter and the seventh chapter scrutinise the constructive alternatives which the two approaches propose for the theorisation of the social. The fourth chapter and the eighth chapter examine the most significant shortcomings of the two approaches.

Part III is divided into two chapters. In the ninth chapter, some key areas of convergence, divergence, and possible integration between Habermasian and Bourdieusian thought are identified. Finally, the tenth chapter explains the main features of the five-dimensional approach to the nature of the social, which is inspired by Habermasian and Bourdieusian thought, but which at the same time seeks to go beyond these two perspectives. The main argument of the study, which weaves these chapters together, can be summarised as follows.

### ***Part I: The Reflection of Critical Theory***

In the first chapter, the Habermasian *concept of critical theory* is elucidated on the basis of three central epistemological reflections. (i) The reflection upon the relationship between knowledge and critique concerns the idea that critique constitutes the motivational cornerstone of critical theory. The strength of critique lies in its power to make the reflective distanciation from the taken-for-grantedness of social life possible. (ii) The reflection upon the relationship between knowledge and interest seeks to reveal that the diverging interests of human knowledge emanate from the diverging interests of human existence. Every specific *Erkenntnisinteresse*<sup>3</sup> is embedded in a specific *Lebensinteresse*<sup>4</sup>. (iii) The reflection upon the relationship between knowledge and language explores the existential significance of the linguistically embedded production of meaning. Our immersion in life is mediated by our immersion in language.

The second chapter examines the *debate over critical theory*. The controversy concerning both the nature and the task of critical theory shows that defining the concept of critical theory is fraught with difficul-

ties. Despite the relative interpretive openness of the concept itself, there are a number of contentious issues related to Habermas's conception of critical theory. Habermas aims to identify and overcome the aporias that are allegedly inherent in three cornerstones of critical theory. (i) The aporias of historical materialism, Habermas contends, are derived from the paradigm of labour. In essence, Habermas accuses Marx of reducing the evolution of the human species to a linear developmental process that is driven by material production. (ii) Following Habermas, the aporias of early critical theory stem from its fatalistic attachment to the paradigm of instrumental reason. Assuming that modern society is permeated by the increasing predominance of instrumental reason, early critical theory is inclined to paint an almost entirely pessimistic picture of modernity, thereby ignoring the emancipatory potential of communicative reason. (iii) The aporias of philosophical hermeneutics are rooted in its short-sighted preoccupation with the paradigm of language. Therefore, Habermas endeavours to replace the interpretive idealism of philosophical hermeneutics by the social holism of critical hermeneutics.

The third chapter analyses the main features of the Habermasian *paradigm shift within critical theory*. Rather than pretending to embrace the entire, multilayered complexity of the Habermasian paradigm shift, this chapter focuses only on those dimensions that are particularly relevant to Habermas's reconceptualisation of the social. In accordance with the previous chapter, three forms of reconstruction are examined. (i) The Habermasian reconstruction of historical materialism is based on the introduction of two concepts that feature centrally in the Habermasian architecture of the social: the concepts of the lifeworld and the system. Thus, the Marxian dichotomy between the material base and the ideological superstructure is replaced by the Habermasian dichotomy between the lifeworld and the system. (ii) The Habermasian reconstruction of critical theory is essentially concerned with the paradigmatic shift from instrumental to communicative reason. According to this shift, the normative foundations of critical theory are to be located in the rational foundations of language. (iii) The Habermasian reconstruction of hermeneutics is motivated by a rigorous defence of the social: the shift from 'philosophical' to 'critical' hermeneutics aims to provide an intersubjectivist account of the production of meaning.

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According to this account, it is neither the isolated subject ‘in-itself’ nor the self-sufficient subject ‘for-itself’ but the reciprocity ‘between’ subjects which reveals that intersubjectivity constitutes the ontological precondition for the very possibility of human coexistence.

On the basis of the analysis developed in the preceding chapters, the fourth chapter examines the *shortcomings* of the Habermasian paradigm shift on three main levels. (i) The Habermasian deformation of historical materialism stems from a highly questionable interpretation of Marxian thought. According to this interpretation, Marx tends to reduce the nature of the social to the material and purposive, rather than the symbolic and communicative, dimensions of human life. Yet, this allegation overlooks the significant fact that, similar to the Habermasian paradigm of communication, the Marxian paradigm of production is embedded in a Kantian tripartite conception of human existence. (ii) The Habermasian reinterpretation of early critical theory is in danger of embracing a deradicalised notion of utopia. Reducing the utopian potential of the social to its linguistic dimensions is tantamount to limiting the emancipatory scope of critical theory. (iii) In addition to the pitfalls that are rooted in the contentious Habermasian reinterpretation of historical materialism and early critical theory, the Habermasian linguistic turn is flawed by some serious internal shortcomings which undermine the explanatory power of Habermas’s theory of communicative action. As will be shown, these inherent deficiencies are symptomatic of the complexity of any theoretical project that seeks to derive its own normative foundations from the ontological foundations of the social.

### ***Part II: The Critique of Reflexive Sociology***

In the fifth chapter, the Bourdieusian *concept of reflexive sociology* is explained by analysing its epistemological presuppositions. The project of reflexive sociology, just as the project of critical theory, is committed to the explicit exposure of its implicit normative assumptions. This self-critical posture is illustrated in the importance of three epistemological reflections. (i) The reflection upon the relationship between knowledge and reflexivity concerns the idea that ‘reflexive’ sociology seeks to distinguish itself from ‘mainstream’ sociology by defining itself as a project



of critical science, self-objectifying vigilance, and epistemological distance. (ii) The reflection upon the relationship between knowledge and praxis explores the sociological implications of the fact that knowledge is always embedded in human praxis. The Bourdieusian notion of *doxa* refers to the idea that an ordinary engagement with the world presupposes an ordinary taken-for-grantedness of the world. (iii) The reflection upon the relationship between knowledge and symbolic power obliges us to acknowledge the unavoidable power-ladenness of the production of meaning. Our power to symbolise life by virtue of language is always also the power to be symbolised; our empowerment through the symbolic always also implies our potential disempowerment by the symbolic; linguistic power is symbolic power.

The sixth chapter elucidates the theoretical background to the *debate over reflexive sociology*. The Bourdieusian project aims at the paradigmatic transition from dichotomist and scholastic thought to reflexive-sociological thinking. The latter seeks to overcome the explanatory limitations of mainstream social thought. (i) Bourdieu contends that objectivism is caught up in a one-sided, object-oriented account of the social. (ii) Analogously, Bourdieu asserts that subjectivism remains trapped in a one-sided, subject-oriented account of the social. (iii) Both forms of reductionism are, according to Bourdieu, embedded in the self-sufficient exercise of scholastic reasoning, the explanatory limitations of which can only be surmounted if we are willing to replace the scholastic philosophy of reason by a critical sociology of reason.

The seventh chapter examines the *paradigm shift of reflexive sociology*. Reflexive sociology constitutes a critical project which seeks to leave the intrinsic contradictions of the 'logic of theory' behind and intends to overcome them by exploring the 'logic of practice' instead. This chapter focuses on those dimensions that lie at the heart of the Bourdieusian ontology of the social. (i) The Bourdieusian reconstruction of objectivity is based on the concept of the field, and (ii) the Bourdieusian reconstruction of subjectivity is epitomised in the concept of the habitus. The concepts of field and habitus are scrutinised by shedding light on their principal properties. By demonstrating that field and habitus share fourteen constitutive features, it is argued that the structural commonalities between field and habitus are indicative of their dialectical interpenetration and that, as a consequence, the Bourdieusian concep-

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tion of the social succeeds in transcending the artificial division between objectivism and subjectivism. (iii) The Bourdieusian reconstruction of the social does justice to the fact that there is no society without structural interrelationality. In order to specify the meaning of 'the social' in the Bourdieusian sense, five ontological preconditions for the very possibility of human coexistence are identified and elucidated.

The eighth chapter looks into the most crucial *shortcomings* of the Bourdieusian project of reflexive sociology. Following the argumentative structure of the previous chapter, the weaknesses of the Bourdieusian approach to the social are analysed on three main levels. (i) The Bourdieusian conception of objectivity is flawed due to its scientific delegitimisation of ordinary knowledge, its reduction of society to a conglomeration of fields, and its functionalist hypostatisation of power. (ii) The Bourdieusian conception of subjectivity is far from uncontroversial since it is based on a reproduction-oriented notion of the subject, an impoverished notion of human consciousness, and a one-sided interpretation of habituality in terms of regularity rather than reflexivity. (iii) The Bourdieusian conception of society contains some serious theoretical limitations because of its tendency to privilege the object over the subject, its lack of preoccupation with the species-distinctive features of the human social, and its failure to explore the emancipatory potentials inherent in ordinary social life.

### **Part III: Between Critical Theory and Reflexive Sociology**

The ninth chapter makes a case for the *cross-fertilisation of critical theory and reflexive sociology*. The choice of the work of Habermas and Bourdieu, who feature centrally in the study of this book, is not fortuitous. Contrary to the belief that their theoretical frameworks represent two incommensurable approaches to the nature of the social, here it is argued that they can be cross-fertilised by analysing their affinities and commonalities, their differences and discrepancies, and their complementary aporias and insights. (i) The theoretical effort to identify substantial points of convergence between Habermas and Bourdieu is guided by the conviction that, although these two thinkers may not necessarily be regarded as bedfellows, their approaches share a considerable amount of important concerns. (ii) The theoretical effort to iden-

tify substantial points of divergence between Habermas and Bourdieu confirms the view that Habermas and Bourdieu are worlds apart on many central issues. Rather than denying the existence and significance of these differences, the comparative analysis developed in this chapter seeks to provide a more fine-grained account of the main dimensions that separate the two thinkers from one another. (iii) The theoretical exploration of substantial points of integration between Habermas and Bourdieu shows that their perspectives are not as far apart as they may appear at first sight and that, more importantly, some of the most significant shortcomings of their approaches can be overcome by combining them. If valuable insights can be gained from the systematic cross-fertilisation of Habermasian and Bourdieusian social theory, then the temptation to separate these two approaches in too categorical a fashion should be resisted.

The tenth chapter proposes an outline of a *five-dimensional approach to the social*. Even though this approach is inspired by the in-depth examination of Habermasian and Bourdieusian thought, it also seeks to go beyond these two perspectives. The aim of this chapter is to propose only a tentative outline, rather than a comprehensive programme, for an alternative critical social theory. The formulation of such an outline seeks to grapple with one main challenge: to derive the normative foundations of critique from the ontological foundations of the social. Identifying this challenge may appear simple; taking it up, however, could hardly be more complex. The five-dimensional approach aims to confront the complexity of this challenge by identifying the socio-ontological foundations of human existence. Here it is assumed that any theoretical framework that strives to justify its critique of society on solid normative grounds needs to identify the ontological foundations which allow for the possibility of human coexistence in the first place. There is no comprehensive critique of society (*Gesellschaftskritik*) without a solid concept of society (*Gesellschaftsbegriff*). Only by locating the normative foundations of critique in the ontological foundations of the social can critical theory succeed in deriving the emancipatory potential of critique from the emancipatory potential of the ordinary social.

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### Notes

1. See, for example: Beer 1999; Crossley 2004; Maeschalck 2001; Poupeau 2000; Sintomer 1999a.

2. See, for example: Bidet 1996, p. 137; Bohman 1997, pp. 177–180; Bohman 1999a, pp. 132, 137, 139–140, 150n.9, 151n.21, and 152n.25; Bouchindhomme 1996, p. 149; Bouveresse 2003, p. 120; Dreyfus and Rabinow 1999, p. 84; Eickelpasch 2002, p. 59; Foster 2005, pp. 89, 98, and 104; Kieserling 2000, p. 36; Papilloud 2003, p. 108; Poupeau 2000; Sintomer 1999a; Sintomer 2005, p. 292; Swartz 1997, pp. 252–253, 255n.20, 271, and 286; Thompson 1992, p. 10; Vázquez García 1999, pp. 208–211; Vázquez García 2002, pp. 196–197; Wacquant 1992e, p. 47; Wacquant 1993, pp. 242–243 and 247.

3. Translation from German into English: ‘cognitive interest’.

4. Translation from German into English: ‘life interest’.