

Profile

THE LEGACY OF NIKLAS LUHMANN

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In some of the many and extensive obituaries published in European newspapers and magazines in 1999, Niklas Luhmann is remembered as the most important social theorist of the 20th century. Yet in much of the Anglo-Saxon world he is virtually unknown among professional social scientists. Luhmann was born into a middle-class family in Lüneburg, Germany on December 8, 1927. Following early graduation from high school (*Notabitur*), he was conscripted briefly in 1944 and taken prisoner of war by the American Forces. From 1946 to 1949, he studied law in Freiburg, entered public administration and worked for ten years as an administrative lawyer in Hanover. In 1962 he received a scholarship to Harvard and spent a year with Talcott Parsons. In 1968, he was appointed professor of sociology at the newly established University of Bielefeld, where he worked until his retirement. Shortly before his appointment he was asked on what subject he wished to work at university. His reply was: “The theory of modern society. Duration 30 years; no costs.” He consequently realised exactly this theoretical program. At the time of his death in December 1998, at the age of 70, he had published an *oeuvre* of over 14,000 printed pages.

Luhmann’s journey toward a theory of modern society has taken a dual approach: first, in the form of essays since the end of the 1960s; and second, in the form of monographs since the 1980s, dealing with the individual function systems of society, such as law, science and art. Luhmann’s intellectual evolution culminated in 1997 with the publication of his *magnum opus* “The Society of Society.” Anyone suspecting redundancy and repetition here might feel at first glance that their scepticism is confirmed. This two-volume work contains no new subjects, let alone any previously unpublished approach. To this extent it is more a completion, a recapitulation, than an

advance into new territory. However, a second, reassuring look reveals much that had not been said before—or at least not in this way. In contrast to the essays, which are sometimes experimental and even playful in tone, and which occasionally close on a question mark, the book format requires a more systematic presentation. “The Society of Society” is the final stone to his theoretical cathedral and provides a map for, and a guide to, the understanding of modern systems theory.

Around this principal work are clustered earlier, individual analyses: “The Science of Society,” “The Economics of Society,” “The Art of Society,” “The Law of Society” and the two posthumously published books: “The Politics of Society” and “The Religion of Society.” The introduction to this series of analyses took the form of a 674-page book bearing the title “Social Systems: The Outline of a General Theory.” This work is still the most concentrated, abstract, and—if one takes the trouble to work through it—also most rewarding presentation of the theoretical core.

We now have a first overall picture at our disposal. If one wishes to do Luhmann justice, one has to find one’s bearings within the architecture of his general approach. Apart from these systemic studies, Luhmann also published a slightly less voluminous series of sociological and historical-semantic analyses. They consist of the four volumes of “Societal Structure and Semantics” and the six volumes of “Sociological Enlightenment.” These studies show Luhmann as a universal scholar, who locates his theory within the historical context of enlightenment and European philosophy. Apart from this far-reaching research, he also produced a range of political and social analyses of modern society, commenting on pressing public problems. We mention only his books “Sociology of Risk,” “Ecological Communication,” “The Reality of the Mass Media” and “The Political

Theory of the Welfare State.” In all, his work consists of some 700 publications and countless translations into English, French, Italian, Japanese, Russian and Chinese.

In almost all of his work, Luhmann makes reference to the operative logic of George Spencer Brown and radical constructivism. These are treated in summary fashion in order to sketch the layout and the conceptual structure of his super-social systems theory, endowed with a range of methodological instruments won in this way. The theory of politics, sociology of religion, sociology of art, and moral sociology are developed subsequently.

In our brief intellectual portrait of Niklas Luhmann, we first deliberately focus on the substance of his social theory, especially the ideas found in his last publication; and we refrain from advancing a sociology of knowledge perspective that attempts to come to grips with—for example—the reluctance of Anglo-Saxon social science to engage Luhmann’s notions as vigorously and prominently as has been the case not only in his own country, but also in Italy, France, and many other non-English-speaking societies. This is a story, and a challenge, that must be left open at this time. Second, once we have outlined the major features of Luhmann’s novel system-theoretical approach, we offer various critical observations and reflections.

The Characteristics of Modern Society

For Luhmann, social differentiation and system formation are the basic characteristics of modern society. This also means that systems theory and the theory of society are mutually dependent. In these terms, a society is not the sum of all current interactions, but rather a system of a higher order, of a different type, determined by the differentiation between system and environment; and it is exactly this distinction which is the subject of Luhmann’s two-volume *The Society of Society*.

Luhmann’s key message is this: sociology is ultimately a theory of society, or it is not a science. If we look back at the history of sociology, this is by no means self-evident. On the contrary, at the start of the last century—and particularly after 1945 in Germany and elsewhere—sociology derived its identity by concealing its relationship with society. It was mainly a theory of social entities, with such categories as roles, interaction, intention and social action forming the basic conceptual framework for a sociology which was increasingly empirical and theoretically inclined to follow the model of the

natural sciences, with their emphasis on causality and the discovery of laws.

The concept of society, however, retained its holistic claim; emphatically defended, for example, by critical theory and developed by Jürgen Habermas into a theory of communicative reason. This claim clashed with the understanding of sociology as a universal and independent theory of social entities. Would the mainstream perspective within sociology turn society into a social system like any other, but at the same time an all-embracing and fundamental system? Sociology has been unable to escape from this paradox, which it has countered by repression and historicisation: Social theory, and particularly critical social theory, has largely been left to the disciplinary concerns of philosophy, which is believed to have the specialists in holistic claims for the ultimate, fundamental structures of thought and relationships with the world. If social scientists dealt with the theory of society, then they did so typically through exegesis of the classics, as if the history of their own discipline had the ability to preserve and recall claims.

Today the exclusion of society from sociology seems to be exacting its revenge. Like Max Weber’s repressed world of the gods who celebrate their return to the modern world in the form of incessant conflicts of values, the concept of society is returning today in a wide diversity of terms, such as “post-industrial society” (Bell), “society of risk” (Beck), “society of knowledge” (Stehr), and “post-modern society” (Lyotard); as if one aspect of society is capable of standing in for the whole. Such ad hoc fabrication of terminology reveals what is being suppressed: namely, the claim to comprehend society in its totality.

So what exactly does this mean for sociology, Luhmann asks, if we wish to avoid the trap of naïve objectivism, which views society as a given object that effectively precedes all scientific observation? The implication of the objective point of view would be that we have to observe society from a point outside of society. There is no such point. Science and society are both an expression of social reality. This is precisely the point where classical sociology of knowledge, for example, has broken down. It was forced to delegate the observation of knowledge to a hypothetical, free-floating intelligence that was not subject to any distortion of perception due to interests or ideologies. More recently, a number of perspectives have come to accept the idea that the act of cognition is always itself a moment in the totality of

cognition. Luhmann shares this approach—and at the same time pushes beyond it by arguing that there cannot be an object “society” accessible to independent observation.

As soon as we cease to regard society as merely another sociological object of research and instead focus on its operational significance as a condition for the possibility of sociological cognition itself, then sociology becomes a subject dealing with itself in exactly the sense in which the subject matter of philosophy speaks of reflection. Luhmann transfers the structure of the self-referential mode of operation by the subject to the theory of social systems. At the same time, he answers the question: How it is possible to practice sociology as a theory of society that does not prematurely screen out the connection between theory and subject? This, according to Luhmann, requires a radical rejection of epistemological positions based on the dichotomy of the subject-object paradigm. Sociology is confronted with society as a subject. Luhmann therefore argues that this requires research into characteristics that it has always generated itself. Luhmann consistently posits a radically anti-humanist, non-ontological and radical-constructivist idea of society.

The most radical assumption of Luhmann’s mature theoretical approach is his emphasis on differences, more precisely on distinctions that are no longer seen as objective differences but as constructions. The substitution of the subject concept and the transfer of the subject/object differentiation into the distinction between system and environment take Luhmann to a post-ontological theory of society, developed on a naturalistic and empirical basis as a theory of observation. This fundamental questioning of the modern philosophy of the subject and the resulting distinction between the natural sciences and the humanities (together with the associated rejection of a humanistic-anthropocentric concept for defining society) have attracted a great deal of criticism, and even more incomprehension, of Luhmann’s approach.

The Genealogy of Luhmann’s System Theory

The concept of the system is Luhmann’s essential starting point. In this respect he is exceptional in German sociology, which at least since Max Weber has mainly been action theory. Luhmann’s proposal to describe social phenomena like interactions, organizations or societies as “systems,” possibly marks this categorical break most emphatically. To think in terms of systems first im-

plies “that we are no longer speaking of objects, but of differences and furthermore that differences are not conceived as existing facts (distinctions), going back instead to an imperative to execute them, since one could otherwise give nothing a name, thus having nothing to observe and would thus also not be able to continue anything” (Luhmann, 1997:60).

The text of “the social” (like all other texts) is neither self-explanatory nor is it deposited in discrete writing. And it does not possess any consistent meaning which is identical with itself, and which one could trace back to any specific instance of its creation. Sociology has to labor without conceiving its domain of objects as a conglomerate of things, analogous to facts possessing a fixed shape—whose inter-relationship, moreover, is ensured in an uniform principle (be it nature, divine will, morals or a transcendental subject). Under the metaphysical conditions of the modern, a meta-perspective that permits the recognition of something resembling the natural as the invariable essence or the totality of society is no longer available to the observer.

According to Luhmann’s system-theory approach, the world (as the horizon of possible descriptions) is expressed by means of a network of contingent distinctions and labels that always have to be understood in context. That an observer may label this as this (and not as that) is due to a distinction in which both moments, separated from each other, can only be understood in relation to each other; the distinctive units only possessing their own identity in the difference to the other. To be able to characterise something as something, one has to have already distinguished it from its distinctive other: what deserves to be called true, for example, is measured by the difference from appearance; and to speak of the past makes sense only with reference to a present that can be distinguished (constitutively) from it. Even if it is not explicitly raised as an issue, this other side of something termed as this or that is always present in every determination of speech or gesture we make. It is a permanent horizon. It is possible to change sides at any time and to bring the distinguished moment of form (appearance for truth, or the present for the past) into the focus of attention, making it the point of departure for further deliberations. In the interest of a deliberate treatment of self and world, it is inevitable that we distinguish and label. Such operations are the start of all perception and recognition.

Why distinctions and labels in different contexts are made in a certain way and not in others is impossible to determine from the perspective of systems theory. Distinguishing always takes place in a medium of lack of forethought and previous indeterminacy, endowing each form with the seal of indelible contingency: in principle one could have made completely different distinctions. To speak of systems thus means to establish a difference: that between system and environment.

By system, Luhmann means a chain of events related to each other, or of operations. In the case of living creatures, for instance, these are physiological processes; for psychic systems, ideas; and in relation to social relationships, communications. Systems are formed by distinguishing themselves from an environment of such events and operations that cannot be integrated into their internal structures.

In contrast to his early mentor Talcott Parsons, who defined systems by means of the presence of collectively shared norms and value patterns, Luhmann proceeds from a system concept shaped in a strictly relational manner. His notion relies on the idea of a constitutive boundary that permits the distinction between inside and outside. Each operation of a system (in the case of social systems: each communication) (re)produces this boundary by embedding itself in a network of further operations, in which it at the same time gains its own unity/identity. Therefore, such a concept of boundary—above all in relation to psychic and social systems—is not to be understood spatially, but rather operatively: “The boundary of the system is nothing but the type and concreteness of its operations which individualise the system. It is the form of the system whose other side thus becomes the environment” (Luhmann, 1997:76-77.). This operative understanding requires the insight that systems are unable to transcend their own boundaries.

Such a research strategy is due to an elementary conviction of the improbability of the emergence of social order. Everything could in principle be different. From Luhmann’s perspective, social structures have nothing self-evident to them: they require permanent new social construction from the view of their existence and of their determined shape. In contrast to the functionalism of the Parsonian persuasion, Luhmann is not committed to the preservation of social systems. On the contrary, the contingency and complexity of the social is the starting point of all of his theoretical efforts.

The complexity of the design of Luhmann’s theory expresses itself not only through the diversity of the sociological issues which he is able to tackle with the help of the system-theory approach, but also in the way that the perspectives vary in their emphasis whenever he presents his general theoretical approach. His *Social Systems* is written primarily from the point of view of the distinction between system and environment, while *The Science of Society* takes the theory of observable systems as its starting point, leading to more epistemological debates about observing observation. If one had to choose such a central point of view for *The Society of Society*, the focus would clearly be on the social system, in contrast to all social subsystems formed through social operations within society.

The Difference of Differences

Luhmann distances himself from what he calls the “old European” ontological theoretical tradition, hopelessly outmoded in its potential for capturing modern society in all its complexity. In doing so, he is trying to overcome two thousand years of tradition that, in his view, have been transcended by the process of functional differentiation. He describes the old European style of thought as concerned with the identification of the unity underlying diversity. Society, in the classical view, consists of subjects of action whose fundamental unity is based on sharing a common understanding. Ontology refers to a world existing objectively in separation from the subjects aware of it, capable of unambiguous linguistic representation.

Against this, Luhmann sets a view of a world that temporalizes, differentiates and decentralizes all identities. Identities are products of past events. Unity is no longer the ultimate point of reference of the theory. By relativizing even the ontological scheme of existence/non-existence as but one of many observational schemata, Luhmann attacks the foundations of powerful traditions of thought. The paradox, according to Luhmann, is that the old European tradition emerged in a society that no longer exists today, either in terms of the system of communication or in terms of forms of differentiation. Even so, this tradition remains part and parcel of our historical heritage, and in this sense a part of the culture that is relevant for orientation. It cannot disappear because it no longer fits; it is constantly negated, and has to be available for this purpose.

Another fundamental distinction emerges here, which Luhmann uses to structure his theory of society: namely, the distinction between social structure and semantics. It is characteristic that this distinction includes itself, is itself a semantic distinction, and the problem is precisely to disentangle this paradox in a fruitful way. The theory of society is located at two levels: on the semantic level it is distinguished from the old European tradition, while on the social structural level reference is made to evolution, differentiation and media development.

Societies without People

Luhmann introduces three premises into his analysis of society that have produced not only vigorous criticism but also extensive misunderstanding, to the point that accusations of anti-humanist and cynical reasoning have been raised against him: (1) Society does not consist of people. Persons belong to the environment of society. (2) Society is an autopoietic system consisting of communication and nothing else. (3) Society can only be adequately understood as world society.

Banishing people to the environment of society completes the decentralization of the humanist cosmology. Having been evicted from the center of the universe in the Renaissance, deprived of its unique origin by being placed in the context of evolution by Darwin, and stripped of autonomy and self-control by Freud, that humanity should now be freed from the bonds of society by Luhmann appears to be a consistent extension of this trend. Whereas the classical European tradition, with its distinction between humans and animals, ascribed sense, reason, will, consciousness and feelings to humans, the inexorable separation of mental and social systems that Luhmann substitutes for *homo socialis* makes it clear that society is a distinct emerging order *sui generis*, which cannot be described in anthropological terms. Society does not have the character of a subject—even in the emphatic transcendental sense, as a condition of the possibility of ultimate underlying ideas or mechanisms of human qualities. It is not an address for human appeals for action, and certainly not a venue for claiming equality and justice in the name of an autonomous subject. Society is the ultimately attainable communicative reduction that divides the indeterminate from what is determinable, or processable from unprocessable complexity.

In a detailed analysis Luhmann traces the increasing distinction between the individual and

society. Only after a clear separation has been made between society and humanity is it possible to see what belongs to society and what has to be allocated to humanity. This opens up the possibility of research into humanity, human consciousness and the functioning of the human mind on the basis of empirical-natural measurement. The thesis of the separation of social systems (or systems of society) and physical systems makes it possible to understand clearly the relationships between society and humanity and follow them over their historical course. Both are in this sense autopoietic systems, one operating on the basis of consciousness and the other on the basis of communication. But what is society?

Society, in an initial approximation, is the comprehensive social system, including everything that is social, and aware of nothing social outside itself. However, everything that is social is identified as communication. Communication “is a genuinely social (and the only jointly social) operation. It is genuinely social in that it presupposes a majority of collaborating systems of consciousness while (for this very reason) it cannot be assigned as a unity to any individual consciousness.” Conversely, it is also true that anything practising communication is a society. This involves far-reaching definitions.

Society as Communication

First, communication is a reality *sui generis* that can no longer be attributed to something else. Second, communication is the mechanism that constitutes society as an autopoietic system and processes it in these terms. The negation of communication is itself communication, and hence the expression of society. Third, if communication means autopoietic reproduction, this means that society is a self-substitutive order that can only change in itself and through itself. Communication becomes the basic structure of society, where the relationship between communication and society is circular: no communication without society, no society without communication. But what is communication? Or is it no longer possible to pose such questions in a post-ontological period?

The simplest answer is that communication is an operation in precisely the sense that a distinction is made. Communicative acts say nothing about the world, and communication reflects nothing about the world, which is not reflected by communication but rather classified by it. The purpose of communication is to create differences

that can then be attached to further communication, forming and stabilising system boundaries. But even communication itself is not original, no ultimate element, but a synthesis of processing selections which Luhmann designates information, transmission and comprehension. These three discriminatory operations are binary in structure.

Information is selected from shared meaning, a reservoir from which things are selected as relevant for transmission or forgetting. Completing the act of communication is a matter of deciding what is represented or accepted or rejected, not understood. Transferred to the social system, it could be said that information can be seen as external reference, transmission as self-reference and comprehension as a condition for the transfer of the meaning in further communication. The synthesis of these three selections is a self-referential, closed event. This enables Luhmann to make clear the self-constitution of what is social. If what is social is nothing more than communication, this also implies that it consists of this autopoietic process which has its own inherent dynamic. The environment is then only a stimulus, not a real source of information. Comprehension accordingly means a not arbitrary networking of communicative events by the self-referential communication process. Repeated discussion forms identities that constitute boundaries.

Society, or what had previously been understood as society in sociology, is now liberated from all substantial determinations. It is not a moral unity, not based on consensus or any rational integration (of whatever kind); it is formed solely by ongoing communication. Accordingly it makes no sense to talk of such distinctions as economy/society or science/society, since politics, economics, and law cannot be regarded as something outside and separate from society, but are acts of society in their communicative operations. For Luhmann, society therefore consists of the totality of those operations, which do not make a distinction by virtue of the fact that they make a distinction. This relegates to secondary theoretical status all assumptions about understanding, progress, rationality and other goals.

Society as World Society

In his third determination of society—namely, the definition of society as world society—Luhmann again deliberately places himself in contrast to the old European tradition. He avoids a territorial definition of society that identifies the

boundaries of society with the frontiers of nation states. Global interdependencies, and the dissolution of temporal and spatial constraints by modern information and transport technologies, are steadily depriving a territorially limited definition of society of its plausibility. The alternative concepts of an international system or a transnational society fail, because for all the cultural differentiation they stress, they do not arrive at a unity of the resulting differentiation and hence are unable to explain the “inter” or “trans.” Instead of being a successor to the tradition of the *societas civilis findet* they merely describe the growing diversity, the complexity and the growth in available options. If the world is no longer understood as the collection of all visible and direct objects, as the *aggregatio corporum*, what is left of the common sense that makes it possible to speak of a world society?

Luhmann bases his conception on an essentially commonplace observation. The final exploration of the earth, and perhaps the exploration of space, has made it evident that the world is a closed, communicative complex. In principle, any point on the globe is accessible to communication, despite all the technical, political or geographical obstacles. World society is the self-eventuation of the world in communication. This definition acquires plausibility if we include the vital future focus of modern society within our view. Historically, there may be a distinction between the individual territories, but one thing they all share now is that the future can only be regarded as a unity. “World” then means exactly this reference in the communication structure of the fully differentiated functional systems, so that “world” as the total horizon of sensory experience is not an aggregate, but rather a correlate, of the communicative operations occurring in it.

Epistemologically speaking, this shift has far-reaching implications. Society is only observable within itself, and can be regarded as a unity in different ways without being able, through decomposition, to arrive at a “genuine” jointly observable world. We will always end up with new distinctions, with constructions. For Luhmann the social-structural location of the theory of observation is secondary. Second-order observation means locating an observer in the world who observes others and generating the various versions of the world (including our observer)—although we can only do so in one world.

Theories of Theories

But how can society document itself without coming into contradiction with itself, and particularly without recourse to transcendental references outside itself? In the last chapter of *The Society of Society*, under the title “Self-descriptions,” Luhmann deals with the intricate relationship between theory and subject. Can theory explain its own location within the process of society? And if it can, does it not regard society to a certain extent from without, although this is possible within society in the capacity of communication? Here, we are reminded (not entirely inappropriately) of Escher’s hand drawing itself, generating itself and its own image in the course of its own operation. Luhmann follows a similar line: “Just like self-observations, self-descriptions (generation of texts) are individual operations of the system. In fact, descriptions and what is described are not two separate objects which are only externally linked—with a self-description, what is described is always part of what it is describing and it changes it simply by the fact that it appears and subjects itself to observation.”

Sociology, then, is always the construction of the unity of the system within the system itself, never reaching an end to this process. This insight prompts Luhmann to avoid any conclusions for his own theory. Although there is a particularly close relationship here with Hegel, who also gave the absolute a self-referential character by regarding the system as entirely self-referential—where nothing can be external because everything external has become an aspect of its self-differential—Luhmann leaves this tradition exactly at this point by translating it into a cybernetic vocabulary and hence overcoming it. Nor is society a subject in the anthropological-interactive sense, as Adorno still viewed it despite all his criticism of philosophy: Society is “a coagulated relationship between people.” Humanity is not the ultimate element in society, nor can society still be described within the classical cognitive model of subject-object; because the self-referentiality of society itself causes this duality to collapse, since cognition seeks intersubjective certainty on the part of the subject and presupposes stable objects. Society is in any case not such a stable object.

Critical Reflections

According to Luhmann’s approach, only radical constructive semantics provide sufficient distance to prevent succumbing to the suggestions

inherent in traditional terminology. Luhmann’s terminology in the theoretically most demanding part of this work is devoid of classical associations and connotations. If the reading of Luhmann’s studies is not to be abandoned due to sheer resignation, frustration or even anger, then his terminology requires considerable tolerance from readers not familiar with the terminology of systems theory.

Luhmann’s strict, austere artificial language is not due to any affectation but rather to the stringency of his theoretical program—and this program has to keep its distance from the implications of the semantics of traditional European social theory. In this respect one should take seriously the penultimate sentence of the “Society of Societies,” according to which an adequate modern theory of society requires the sacrifice of the mere pleasure of recognition and the judging of theory construction on its own merits.

This does not imply that reading Luhmann’s theory is simply a struggle with nominal constructions and cascades of abstract terms; in between one finds analyses of traditional European semantics, in which Luhmann attempts to clarify why they are no longer adequate for the structural facts of modern society. Again and again there are pointed and paradoxical formulations, in which the fruits of the switch in theory formation from first-order observation to second-order observation are bundled as under a magnifying glass. An example of this would be when Luhmann says of memory that its true function for society consists not of storage, but rather of forgetting; or when he conceives of information as a product of decay that disappears by being updated.

Such paradoxes are more than skilful plays on words: they provide entry points to the constructivist core of Luhmann’s societal theory, which consists of the fact that all observation is based on paradox to the extent that it relies on distinctions upon which it cannot reflect as a uniform whole. The unity of the world as the unity of society, according to Luhmann, cannot be asserted as a principle but simply as a paradox—this too is a consequence of the loss of meaning of traditional semantics.

But is the loss of meaning of old European semantics truly compelling in the face of the four volumes by Luhmann on the subject of “structure of society and semantics”? Or, is it at least reinforced well by methodology? One can doubt that this is so, since Luhmann is forced to fall back on

socio-structural developments to be able to establish the loss of significance of socio-political semantics. This circularity is probably the weak point in Luhmann's theory of society. Of course, this did not escape Luhmann, but the solutions he suggested were not particularly consistent. They stretch from the admittance of circularity as an inevitable pre-requisite of theory formation—which traditional European semantics were only able to avoid by recourse to metaphysical constructions, such as God, nature or reason—to the claim that semantic changes were subject to structural change at considerable distance, as a result of which semantics are suddenly again in the position of verbally depicting facts. But is it really true that social change precedes cognitive change, or are there also cases where the opposite is true?

Luhmann analysed the change from traditional European society to modern society by using three dimensions, to each of which he dedicates three main chapters of his societal theory ("The Society of Society"): first, the social dimension, which Luhmann conceives as that of communication and media, constituted only by the distinction between Ego and Alter (deliberately avoiding the traditional European semantics of person and subject); second, the temporal dimension, in which past and future are separated, and which Luhmann terms evolution—definitely not progress, since there is no guiding medium among the various media and the functional differentiation of society has no guiding system; and third and finally, the factual dimension, which Luhmann comprehends as functional differentiation, and in which we are concerned with determining the system and the environment. These are not, however, stable distinctions, that which constitutes environment depending instead on the component system concerned, on science or the economy, law or education. And this also changes during the evolution of the component systems.

Decisive for Luhmann's theory of society is the assertion that there is no dominance of any component system in the dimension of functional differentiation, for instance of politics; that in the dimension of communication, no dominant medium may be recognised; and furthermore, that the lack of guiding systems and dominant media is the definitive characteristic of modern society. This is also the reason why traditional European semantics can no longer adequately describe a modern society.

But is the loss of measure due to the conversion of norms and values into forms of societal

communication, as described by Luhmann, really plausible? Unfortunately, Luhmann at no point makes reference to Michael Walzer's concept of spheres of justice: Within this concept, what Luhmann has described as the appropriate self-description of modern societies is described as their permanently-to-be-achieved norm, as the measure of justness that is permanently threatened by the domination of—to use Luhmann's term—component systems.

This closes the circle for a major train of thought, so that what initially appeared a paradox—namely, that the self is at the same time what is different—emerges as a complete theory of society that also includes reflection on its own location in society, and regards society in this sense as a unity capable of self-modification. If we take this strictly intra-social perspective seriously, accepting that any communication about society can only take place within society, then there is no location for critical reflection on society external to society, where society can be regarded as an object. This description of society in society is no longer based on the concept of the subject or seen from the standpoint of transcendental rationality. It is the tautological operation of communication itself. Society is society's formula for the self-description of social unity. An emphatic definition of sociology would here seek the unity of this difference in order to distinguish what is actual, what is essential. The unity of society would then be a society that has arrived at itself, corresponding to its ideal. Tradition has reserved the label "enlightenment" for this, and measured existing society against this claim. Sociological explanation of enlightenment must abandon these claims, since this position can still be observed, even if only from the point of view of second-order observation. The contingency of the world cannot be reversed in this sense, because sociological theory belongs to the very thing that it is analysing, namely society.

The true meaning of sociology would hence be that it is set free to engage in this type of self-description in order to modify the semantic legacies of tradition to the changed social structural relationships in the process of "re-description." This bridges the second major distinction between semantics and social structure. Modern society, through functional differentiation, generates the compulsion to self-observation and so changes all the thematic elements. This brings postmodernism to the point where the past be-

comes material for present descriptions that create new forms through re-description and thus become self-perpetuating constructions. However, it is not a question of looking back nostalgically on what has passed, but rather of awareness of semantics, which is permanently renewing itself. The decisive thing is the difference, and not the unity of an all-seeing observer. In this sense Luhmann's theory is a post-ontological theory that proceeds in an empirical and operational manner, and is still facing its practical test.

At the same time, the question remains: How far does the merciless deconstruction of the concept of the subject and its replacement by the concept of the self-referential, closed, autopoietic system—which is no longer a special object but instead perceived as the difference between system and environment—create a distance from the old European tradition and its contradictions? Does the emphasis on the category of difference as the key sociological concept constitute a suitable reaction to the antinomies of an ultimately still anthropological configuration of sociology, based on the fundamental notion of an unresolved subject and using humanity, its subjectivity and freedom as the ultimate decisive principles of orientation?

Further discussion will show how far the radical shift in theory from identity to difference constitutes a replacement for the tradition of thinking in terms of unity or totality. In its place Luhmann sets the theory of second-order observation, which is intended to eliminate all transcendental premises and leaves as the ultimate references descriptions of descriptions and observations of observations, which abolish privileged standpoints and conclusions. In this sense sociology organises itself as research. The fertility of the present theoretical design will have to prove itself in terms of how far it helps us to transform the traditional legacies into contingencies, so that they can be reused “as a medium for shaping new forms gained through reconstruction” (Luhmann, 1998:1148). At this point Luhmann remains linked to the old European tradition—only the degree of distance is still in dispute.

Luhmann returns an issue to sociology that it has almost forgotten: scientific and reflected discussion of society. Just as biology and physics do not depend on their basic concepts alone, so sociology is not just social theory. However, if it wants to provide information on its foundations and its position in society, it can hardly avoid social theoretical reflections; if only because it is able, by virtue of its function within society, to

observe all previous forms of reflection, such as religion, philosophy and science.

Luhmann's theory of society, it could be argued, offers a way that leads, through the latest scientific methods and on a strictly theoretical basis, to a rich theory of modern society. Luhmann opens up links for sociology with other sciences, and this enables him to integrate a flow of new research into his theory. Two groups of problems might be examined in further pursuit of a theory of society. First, we can ask if we share Luhmann's description of the problem of proceeding consistently from an intra-social constitution of theory. This will already settle a great deal. Second, we need to review his solution of regarding a theory of society as a theory of social systems, or replace it by a reasonable alternative. As we are in any event no longer required to reach final conclusions, it is now a matter of finding usable continuations, since it is clear that even after Luhmann there will still be sociological and other descriptions of society. The question is merely whether they will reach the level and degree of complexity displayed in Luhmann's work, especially in his last monograph. As Adorno said: “Only a mature theory of society can say what society is.” Perhaps Luhmann's approach has taken us a step closer to this.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READINGS

- Luhmann, Niklas *Observations on Modernity*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998.
- Luhmann, Niklas *Social Systems*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1995.
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