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NIKLAS LUHMANN (1927–1998)

Niklas Luhmann was a German sociologist who developed a general theory of society in the form of social systems theory. After having obtained a degree in law in 1949 at the University of Heidelberg, he worked briefly in the legal profession and then as a civil servant. He developed a thorough interest in philosophy, social and political theory, and literature, and studied these subjects autodidactically. He obtained a scholarship that enabled him to study sociology at Harvard University from 1960 to 1961. Here, Talcott Parsons introduced him to systems theory. After his return to Germany, Luhmann took up a research position at an academy for administration. In 1966 he first obtained his Ph.D. degree and then his habilitation, which qualified him for a professorship at German universities. In 1968 he was appointed as professor in sociology at the newly founded University of Bielefeld with the support of Helmut Schelsky, a major German sociologist and public intellectual of the time. Luhmann remained at the University of Bielefeld until his retirement in 1993. He was an extremely prolific writer, publishing or copublishing more than forty books and some four hundred essays.

Luhmann did not fully embrace Parsons' theoretical framework and created his own version of social systems theory on the basis of many diverse influences, including, but not limited to, Parsons' functionalism, cybernetics, German Idealism (Kant and Hegel especially), phenomenology (particularly Husserl), radical constructivism, the logical thought of George Spencer Brown, major modern theories of society (Marx and Weber), and a lively debate with the Frankfurt School. The decisive "autopoietic turn" – namely, the adoption of the premise that social evolution has to be understood in terms of self-generating and self-regenerating operations of communication – which characterizes his work in the 1980s and 1990s was initiated by an integration of the evolutionary biology and theory of cognition of Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela into his social systems theory. In the final decade of his life, Luhmann continued to modify his theory through an active engagement with poststructuralist thinkers (for example, Deleuze, Derrida, and Foucault).

Luhmann conceived of society as a complex and continuously evolving autopoietic supersystem of communication consisting of multiple operationally closed but structurally coupled subsystems (e.g., the economy, politics, mass media, religion, art, etc.). His theory is an explicitly antiregionalist and antihumanist radical social constructivism. This is to say that modern society has to be understood as a world society in which all defining structures, functions, and codes are global (although the theory also acknowledges regional differences within world society on the basis of common global structures). Society is not understood as a sum of individuals or constituted through human agency, but rather as an effect of the evolution of communication and the formation of communication systems. Communication is a constructive operation that operates by making distinctions. These distinctions, which can also be understood in terms of "observations," construct social reality and meaning or sense (*Sinn*).

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Luhmann regarded "functional differentiation" as the decisive criterion of modernity. He postulated that in Europe in the period between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries stratified differentiation (i.e., the organization of society along the dividing lines between different social strata or classes) was gradually replaced with a differentiation between different social subsystems, each of which took on a unique function in society. Modern European functional differentiation eventually spread and is now globally present – which also implies that no postmodern era has yet arrived.

Luhmann's works can be divided into four categories. First, his two major works *Social Systems* (1984 [1995]) and *A Theory of Society* (two volumes, published in 1997 [2012–2013]) present encompassing outlines of his social systems theory as a whole. Second, several monographs outline the functioning of specific social systems within world society, including the legal system, religion, politics, the economy, art, the science or academic system, education, and the mass media. Typically these monographs describe the specific social functions, codes, programs, and other relevant characteristics of each respective system. Third, a series of publications on "social structures and semantics" outline the varying relations between the historical development of certain semantics along with the formation of modern social structures, or, what is the same, functional differentiation. By far the most famous publication in this category is *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy* (1982 [1986]), which analyzes the genesis of the semantics of passionate love (primarily in European literature between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries) in conjunction with shifts in the intimacy system (family and marriage structures) and other systems. Fourth, a number of works address contemporary social and political issues from a social systems theoretical perspective, for example *Ecological Communication* (1986 [1989]), which discusses the emergence of the ecological movement.

Luhmann became widely known in Germany, and later on internationally (initially mostly in the Italian-, Spanish-, and Portuguese-speaking worlds, but then also increasingly in the English-speaking world) after a book publication with Jürgen Habermas entitled *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie – Was leistet die Systemforschung?* [Theory of society or social technology: what is achieved by systems research?] (1971). This book, which as of yet has not been translated into English and is over four hundred pages long, resulted from joint university seminars to which Habermas had invited Luhmann. It laid the foundation of a decades-long informal debate between Habermas and Luhmann and their respective followers, and was also labeled the Luhmann–Habermas or Bielefeld–Frankfurt controversy. The book opens with two essays by Luhmann on social systems theory and the concept of meaning, and one essay by Habermas on communicative competence. These essays are followed by two lengthy critical studies of one another by the two coauthors; first a text by Habermas with a title identical to the book title, and then a response by Luhmann entitled "Systems-theoretical Argumentations."

Luhmann shares with Habermas an approach to a theory of society via a theory of communication. However, this is about as far as commonalties go; in other respects the theories tend to diverge to such an extent that Luhmann expresses some fundamental doubts about the productivity of the Bielefeld–Frankfurt controversy. In 1986 he stated in an interview: "Contrary to what it should be like in a good controversy, I do not gain much from reading Habermas . . . His theory is like an island that cannot be connected with anything further . . . In Habermas, I simply do not see the possibility of a truly encompassing theory . . . For me, the difference between system and lifeworld is simply too big" (Luhmann 1997, 71). For Luhmann, Habermas's focus on normativity made it impossible to develop a theory that could do justice to the complexities

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of society. Rather than providing useful analyses of the functioning of society, Habermas eventually preferred prescriptive utterances intended to steer society toward specific morally desirable goals. From a social systems theory perspective, the very notion of human social steering is misplaced and represents not only a "humanist" misunderstanding of autopoietic social evolution but also a lack of self-reflection regarding the position of theory in society. According to Luhmann, social theory is itself a part of the society it observes; social theorists are themselves "rats in the labyrinth" (Luhmann 2006a, 250) – which is to say that their observations cannot be understood as privileged viewpoints from which society can be externally guided; rather, theorists have to "autologically" infer that the structures of observation which they observe also apply to their own observations. Speaking in Luhmannian terms, they can see that they cannot see what they cannot see.

Luhmann accuses Habermas of promoting a "monoculture of reason" (Luhmann 2006b, 261), that is, a post-Kantian vision of a commonly shared rationality geared toward social consensus. For him, an important aspect of functional differentiation, and thus of modernity, is the multiplicity, incommensurability, and synchronicity of various systems rationalities. Consequently, consensus is not a principle on which modern social diversity could be built or along which it could be theoretically imagined. Moreover, the contingency of multiple systems rationalities also pertains to the theoretical observer, who must communicate within a specific systems rationality as well. In this way, theoretical rationality undermines its own assumed universal validity and becomes "self-critical reason" or "ironical reason" (Luhmann 1996, 45).

Luhmann's pronouncement that he had always believed that his kind of social theory "would be much more radical and much more discomforting in its effects than narrowly focused criticisms – critiques of capitalism for instance – could ever imagine" (Luhmann 1997, 200) can very well be understood as directly aimed at Critical Theory in general and at Habermas in particular. For Luhmann, Habermas merely perpetuated an "old European" semantics, which, rather than providing a thorough insight into the actual "antihumanist" functioning of modern society, only provided some pleasing utopian self-descriptions (such as "freedom," "democracy," "reason," "rationality," or "human rights") that helped society maintain its stability. Ironically, while Habermas and the Frankfurt School tended to describe Luhmann as a conservative whose lack of critical spirit only perpetuated the social status quo, Luhmann thus regarded himself as the more radical analyst whose theory had a much higher subversive potential to challenge the dominant bourgeois semantics inherited from the Enlightenment.

Habermas offered a profound analysis and criticism of Luhmann's mature (postautopoietic turn) theory in one of the essays he included in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (PDM, 368–85). Here, he correctly connects Luhmann with the German philosophy of consciousness and subjectivity ranging from Kant to Husserl. Habermas acutely observes that Luhmann, however, replaced the traditional German metaphysical approach to issues of consciousness and subjectivity with a "metabiological" one that understands cognition and communication in analogy to "organic life" and focuses on "the cybernetically described, basic phenomenon of the self-maintenance of self-relating systems in the face of hypercomplex environments" (PDM, 372). This move undermines the primacy of the rational subject and replaces the universal necessity of reason with a merely self-referential, contingent systems rationality. Habermas writes:

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> Reason as specified in relation to being, thought, or proposition is replaced by the self-enhancing self-maintenance of the system. By taking this approach, Luhmann also goes beyond a critique of reason that aims at revealing the power of self-maintenance to be the latent essence of subject-centered reason. Under the title of systems rationality, reason, now liquidated as irrational, professes exactly this function: it is the ensemble of the conditions that make system-maintenance possible. (PDM, 372–73)

Accordingly, Habermas accuses Luhmann, not without justification, of being a hidden post-structuralist in too-close proximity to nihilism; he says that for Luhmann, "validity dissolves. The same thing happens as with Foucault: the interest in truth (and validity in general) is restricted to the effects of holding-something-as-true" (PDM, 373).

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SEE ALSO:

Functionalist Reason
Lifeworld and System
Modernity and Modernization
Talcott Parsons

SUGGESTED READING

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