

Theory of Society, Volume 1, by Niklas Luhmann, translated by Rhodes Barrett, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012. 488pp. \$27.95 paper. ISBN 9780804739504

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Who now reads Luhmann? This is a ridiculous question, as few of us ever have or will. And as the question intimates, those (Americans) who have undertaken the task of getting to know this monumental German thinker tend to do so through a Parsonian prism, which both distorts the landscape of his thought and makes most less inclined to look to his scholarship for insights. But with the publication of the first half of his final work, *Theory of Society*, we are given a moment to re-evaluate the ideas of this elusive social theorist. The book represents a culmination of Luhmann's career as a sociologist. It is the first volume of *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (literally, "The Society of Society"), published in German in 1997, one year before Luhmann's death. In many ways, the book gathers insights scattered across Luhmann's some 60 books and 400 articles. It may not be the place the start if one is looking to make sense of this rich life of work¹, but this book provides the clearest articulation of it: constructing a (grand) theory of society. Such a project is perhaps more suited for prophets seeking followers than for theoreticians hoping that journeymen scholars will take up, evaluate, and reformulate their ideas through study of the empirical world. Yet I still believe Luhmann deserves our attention – not because we might all become Luhmannian, but because reading his work helps us better understand the kinds of questions we don't ask, and an intellectual trajectory we have not taken. Such absence helps us better see the present state of American sociology. In this review I outline the life and ideas of

¹ I would suggest that the most accessible introduction to Luhmann is his 1989 book, *Ecological Communication*. It is hardly comprehensive in exploring his thought. But the interested yet uninitiated reader might begin here.

Luhmann in the hope that sociologists will better understand his thought and see that which is perhaps invisible or unasked in their work.

The Life of Luhmann

In 1927 Niklas Luhmann was born into a family of brewers from Luneburg, Germany². His early education was interrupted by Germany's declining fortunes in the war; at 15 he was manning anti-aircraft guns at the airbase near his home, and by 16 he was full-fledged soldier in the south of Germany. It was not long before Luhmann was captured by Americans and became a prisoner of war, spending the last 6 months of the war in a labor camp.

Luhmann recalled that his early life was marked by the breakdown of social order – from the rise of the Third Reich to the interruption of his school days to fight, to the chaos of the German forces in the twilight of the war, to the beatings he received once in his Marseille work camp. Perhaps it should be no surprise, then, that the young Luhmann initially chose law as his profession, enrolling at Freiburg after his return to Germany. Upon the completion of his degree Luhmann returned to his hometown as a trainee lawyer. He found the demands of recruiting and satisfying individual clients burdensome and so soon after began a career as a public servant (starting in 1954).

² For an outstanding review of Luhmann's life and work, see Rudold Stichweh's entry, "Niklas Luhmann" in the *Blackwell Companion to Major Social Theorists*. Professor Stichweh is both more sympathetic to Luhmann and provides an outline of his ideas in far greater detail that I do here. I would encourage interested readers to visit his work. I have drawn on it extensively for this biographical information. For other treatments of Luhman I would encourage scholars to read Daniel Lee's outline of *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, written before the present translation had appeared (2000), Ilana Gershon's argument about what Luhmann might bring to the discipline of anthropology – though her incites certainly bear on sociology as well (2005), Jakob Arnoldi's introduction to a special issue of *Theory Culture & Society* that was dedicated to the ideas of Luhmann – whose essays are worth reading for more specific engagements with Luhmann's theory (2001), and Gothard Bechmann and Nico Stehr's essay, "The Legacy of Niklas Luhmann" (2002).

Luhmann was a voracious reader, and during these years began devouring sociological texts. In 1960 Luhmann applied for a stipend to visit Harvard (at the Littauer Center for Public Administration – what would become the Kennedy School), and for a year found himself under the tutelage of Talcott Parsons. The influence of Parsons on Luhmann is immense, but it also is commonly overstated. Luhmann’s career was spent (re)working systems theory, and presenting a radically different model than that of Parsons. Had other theoretical traditions taken up systems theory more seriously, then Luhmann might not be so allied in our imagination with Parsonian thinking; but in the absence of others working in this realm, it seems that Luhmann is the inheritor of the Parsonian kingdom (such as it is).

This reading is unfair to both Luhmann and Parsons. Upon his return to Germany Luhmann published his (now) classic essay, “Function and Causality,” with critically assessed the kind of functionalist explanations provided within Parsons (see the first chapter of *Social Systems* (1995) for a reprise of these ideas). This essay, combined with his fast-growing list of scholarly works landed Luhmann a series of professorships before he became the first professor at the newly formed Bielefeld University (Luhmann was appointed before the university had begun to enroll students). He remained in Bielefeld for the rest of his career. Unlike other prominent academics, Luhmann generally avoided politics, intellectual trends, or the mass media (even though he would become famous for writing on this “system”). Instead he quietly but powerfully built a body of work that – at least in terms of the number of pages written – is almost unrivaled in sociology. And much of it had a singular theme.

When discussing becoming a professor at Bielefeld, Luhmann was asked about his research program. He replied, “A Theory of Society.” Ambitious and immodest, nonetheless this is what Luhmann sought. His writings gradually built such a theory, with books on Law, Art,

Love, Mass-Media, Distinction, Education, Ecology, Risk, and countless other topics that have not be translated into English (or are simply unknown to me). *Theory of Society* is proof that Luhmann's answer in 1967 was not arrogant bluster, but the project of a dedicated unique mind. And while Luhmann passionately argues that such a project is necessary for the sociological enterprise, it also took him further and further away from what many American sociologists would recognize as our own discipline.

The Thought of Luhmann

The first thing an American reader needs to know about Luhmann is that people are relatively unimportant. Luhmann argues that sociologists have proceeded from the false presumption that society is made up of individuals and that social integration is the product of individual values or interests (2012: 6). Almost all of the work published in American sociology journals thereby proceeds from incorrect premises and engages a kind of analysis (variable-based) that, from a Luhmannian perspective, is mistaken. This is a radical idea that is almost impossible to grasp from within American sociology; but it is one worth entertaining.

While generally contemptuous of analogous thinking, let me offer up a comparison for the reader to help enter the world of systems theory for a moment. Perhaps the best entrée is one version of network analysis where we imagine individuals as nodes in a network. As such the explanatory weight of this approach falls not the individuals themselves and their properties, but instead in the structural arrangement between the units. In this sense, individuals are epiphenomenal to the analysis, and in radical versions we could think of

properties of people not as aspects of the self, but instead, consequences of a network structure.

This is not Luhmann's argument, but given how foreign his argument may be to some, it might well help the reader see the terrain we are about to enter. And it also helps illustrate the distance between Luhmann and Parsons; whereas Parsons began his career grappling with theories of action, Luhmann suggests if such theories are based upon the individual as the unit of analysis, then they engage with phenomena that are socially meaningless.

That is because at the heart of the Luhmannian model is a distinction between system and environment. Systems undertake a series of task, one of the foremost of which is boundary maintenance (people, it should be noted, are part of the environment of systems; they do not constitute those systems). Whereas Parsons imagines systems as interdependent (embedded within each element of the AGIL schema is every other element of that schema), Luhmann argues that the basic work of social systems is one of differentiation. To be clear systems are not autonomous. Instead, Luhmann thinks of them as autopoietic.

Confused? Desperate for an example? You're not getting one. At least not from Luhmann. And so let me take a step back, and we can return to these ideas shortly after walking through how Luhmann arrives at his positions.

In 1971 Jurgen Habermas and Niklas Luhmann published a book together, *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie: Was leistet die Systemforschung* (Theory of Society or Social Technology: What does Systems Research Accomplish?). Sadly, this book has never been translated into English. Yet the debate announced two radically different directions for social research. Habermas laid out his spirited defense of modernity – particularly emphasizing the emancipatory potential of reason, grounded in individuals and their interactions with one

another. He also launched an attack on systems theory, arguing that its counter-enlightenment tendencies toward technocratic functionalism resulted in neo-conservative positions. For his part, Luhmann criticized the naïve approach of the New Left – represented here by Habermas – particularly in their incapacity to consider or make sense of social complexity. “Modern” society was not so simple that rational communication could sweep in and solve all our social problems. The world was much too complex and layered; we require a similar sociological theory to make sense of it.

Luhmann ended up moving in two directions after this debate. First, like Habermas, he began to think seriously about communication within modern societies (but in a radically different way). Second, he began to look beyond sociology for theoretical guidance to make sense of modern complexity. From Husserl, Luhmann began to think of psychic systems (consciousness) and social systems (communication) as separate, or at least distinct. And this is part of the reason why his thinking is relatively unpopulated by people. But to take from philosophers is not uncommon, particularly among continental theorists. Luhmann ventured far further. His interest in systems led him away from social systems and into biology, where he drew upon the work of Chilean biologist and philosopher Humberto Maturana.

Maturana (along with Francisco Varela) invented the idea of “autopoiesis” – a kind of self-(re)producing entity³. Whereas Maturana and Varela developed their model using living beings, Luhmann began to apply the idea to social systems. Maturana’s work drew heavily on mathematician George-Spencer Brown’s work, particularly *Laws of Form* (1969), a book that

³ Their classic example was a biological cell. Varela and his colleagues write, “Consider for example the case of a cell: it is a network of reactions which produce molecules such that (i) through their interaction generate and participate recursively in the same network of reaction which produced them, and (ii) realize the cell as a material unity.” (Varela et. al 1974: 188)

explores the logical systems of Algebra. From Brown both Maturana and Luhmann both take the importance of “distinction.”

And from this, we have three central elements of Luhmann’s theory: communication, autopoiesis, and distinction. Experts will object that there is so much more. Alas, there always is. But this is enough for us to finish our task of making sense of Luhmann. It should also give the reader a clue as to why Luhmann feels so foreign. His ideas emerge from and engage with literatures we rarely encounter or consider. Scholars of cybernetics – a deeply transdisciplinary field – are on firmer ground in thinking through Luhmann. Sociologists must find ways to think through evolutionary biology, philosophy, communications, and organizational and systems theory. It’s no easy task (one defender of Luhmann may argue I’m not up for!). The question is, is it worth it? To answer that, and to end, let me turn more fully to *Theory of Society*.

Luhmann organizes this first half of *Theory of Society* around three main themes: Society as a Social System, Communication Media, and Evolution. The first part of the book, “Society as a Social System,” is largely a reprise of *Social Systems* (1995), which began as a preface to *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* but soon ballooned into a project all its own. The opening premise for Luhmann is that societies are increasingly complex and such complexity results in restructuring and adaptation. This should feel very common – many of our sociological theories proceed from the complexity premise, but whereas other theories think about the organizing principles of people (think division of labor), Luhmann turns his attention instead to systems.

What is a system? It is a realm of society that has a relatively distinct logic and function. Sociologists can have irrationally visceral reactions to the word “function” – even though

they deploy the concept relentlessly. Think about law for a moment. It is a realm of society that has a distinct set of rules, a particular language, and functions to deal with a host of social issues and concerns (whether you believe law serves to create order or apartheid or both, you still think about the purposes that law serves – or its function).

For Luhmann systems convert disorder into organized complexity. And they do so largely through some kind of internal logic and by maintaining the boundaries (distinctions) between their modes of being and those of others around them. If we stay within the case of the law, we can imagine how the law solves challenges by converting ambiguity and disorder into new legal principles that are based in legal logic and language. At the same time, law as a system works to differentiate itself from other social systems. There are problems that are the purview of the law and thereby dealt with by law in the (communicative) logic of the law, and there are other problems to which the law is irrelevant. These problems are part of the environment that the law works within, but they are not legal concerns.

We now have a clearer view of what it means to say that a system is autopoietic but not autonomous. Which is to say that the law creates organized complexity through its own logic. But it is embedded within other systems which themselves function similarly to the law (economy, polity, etc.). Elements of the social system are each distinct from one another, deploying their own logic and working to defend both that logic and the boundaries or edges of their domain, but they exist embedded within an environment made up by every other system.

Such a position results in what Luhmann calls, “a radically anti-humanist, radically anti-regional and radically constructivist concept of society” (2012:12).⁴ Luhmann demands radical constructivism because “reality” is contingent upon the perspective of particular systems and, importantly, science itself is a system. Luhmann’s epistemology is both complex and fascinating (interested readers should consult the final chapter of *Systems Theory*, which was expanded into a book in its own right, *Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft*). These ideas about constructivism might be explained most succinctly through Spinoza, of whom Luhmann seems particularly fond: “That which cannot be conceived through anything else must be conceived through itself” (*Ethica I, Axiomata II*). Claims about systems must be made from within social systems and thereby create conditions of their own “objectification” – resulting not in “reality” but its relative construction. The society of society (or, *Theory of Society*), requires that society be observed from inside itself, and recognizing this has epistemic implications for the production of knowledge of society.

Understanding Luhmann’s concept of communication is important here. Luhmann opens his book on mass media with what has become one of his most famous lines, “Whatever we know about our society, or indeed about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media” (2000: 1). But Luhmann is not expanding upon Horkheimer and Adorno, arguing that a culture industry is creating ideological dupes. Instead, he seeks to argue that systems are defined by communication; such communication is not a description of reality (objective or otherwise), instead it helps constitute the logic and boundaries of systems – thereby constructing the conditions through which systems both manage and make sense of

⁴ I do not discuss this “anti-regional” point in this review. But quickly on the insight: if you think of economics as a system, you might argue that the bounds or region are fast evaporating as economic processes globalize (you also might argue against this). But the point is simple enough: we tend to think in regional units because region tends to be important to us as individuals. But to systems, the bounds of such regions are less important than processes of system maintenance.

their operations and their environment. Luhmann gives us a tripartite model of information, utterance, and understanding (2012: 113; see also chapter 4 of *Social Systems*). Such a model allows for a complex interplay of what information is being transferred, how it is transferred (whether intended or not), and then how it is received (which itself reinstitutes the communicative process by re-conceptualizing information).

Such a model seeks to move us away from the Weberian/Parsonian action frame of reference, or rather to reconstruct action in such a way that it is understood not relative to the agency of individuals, but instead to the self-referential pattern of communication within different functionally differentiated systems (law, economics, art, religion, etc.). Again, each system exists in relation to all other systems – “the environment” (this is what Luhmann means by autopoiesis rather than autonomy). Each system has its own mode of communication (which both helps reduce ambiguous complexity and maintain the boundaries of system). But insofar as systems exist in relation to one another, they must communicate with one other. As systems of communication are internally constructed, information, utterances, and understanding are not seamlessly transferred across systems.

Let me do something very unLuhmannian, which is to provide an example. The system of communication for the economy might be thought of as monetary exchange. From within this system, then, such communication helps reduce complexity as it gives a way for elements within this system to be arranged and made sense of. To go to a store and exchange currency for a hat “makes sense” within the communicative logic of system.

Luhmann argues that like all others, this system seeks to aggressively maintain (and even expand) its bounds. But the logic of the system does not apply to other systems. Instead, those systems use a different communicative logic. If I committed a crime and went before a

judge and offered a monetary exchange to “make up for” my crime, or if upon visiting my parents I were to pay them for the dinner they cooked me, I would be deploying a communicative logic that was inconsistent with that of the legal or familial systems.

Luhmann would never write a paragraph like that above, in part because I have fallen back upon the unit of analysis of the individual. But hopefully it will help the reader better understand the importance of communication, differentiation, and autopoiesis. Through self-referential logics, systems organize and make legible the world. Such legibility is not an objective description, but instead a constructed contingency of the particular system. Systems function and survive by differentiating themselves from their environment (other systems). But they also depend upon that environment, engage with it, and often misunderstand or are misunderstood by it because of different logics of communication (and as such, systems are not static, but evolve in relation to their environment). So for example, the economic system has a way of organizing itself. It survives in part by defending (and attempting to expand) its boundaries. But its functioning requires political, familial, and legal systems. Economic communication does not describe the world so much as it does construct a mode of understanding it that is not universally applicable.

Here, then, we have a rough outline of Luhmannian sociology. Such thought is a kind of labyrinth that, once occupied for long enough, can soon become a home. And once it does, its contours reveal themselves to be more complex than I have been able to convey in this relatively sort introduction. Evaluating Luhmann’s ideas is difficult. They certainly don’t fit within much of American sociology. Many sociologists imagine themselves as part of a project of such human emancipation. While they may not agree with the trappings of a Habermasian approach to modernity, their basic stance is the same: a sociology populated by

people who have a capacity to better the conditions of their life through their own activities. Yes, we have structures. But those too can be organized, arranged, and re-constituted by action. None of this makes sense to Luhmann, and it is why some read him as a conservative. But that is a political claim, not an empirical one or an analytic evaluation. And my judgment of this work ends perhaps in an unsatisfactory place for the reader, but in the only place I feel comfortable occupying. And that is, simply, that Luhmann's ideas must be evaluated empirically. Which is to say that if they are useful to scholars in making sense of phenomena, then we can better understand their power, and their limits. But until these ideas are put to work in ways that go beyond endless theoretical self-reference, we can say little about Luhmann. Reading him is not enough. Who now uses Luhmann? Until more scholars respond, "I do!" we will have to wait for a fuller evaluation of his ideas. And unfortunately, to my reading, *Theory of Society* is unlikely to inspire scholars to undertake such a challenge.

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