

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Niklas Luhmann, *Introduction to Systems Theory*. Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2013, 284 pp. \$29.95 paper (978-0-7456-4572-8)

There are solid reasons for asserting that Niklas Luhmann (1927–1998) is the most important social theorist of his generation. Although his influence today remains limited in comparison to Bourdieu, Giddens, or Foucault, his ideas prove to be far more original and unsettling than theirs. Can this new *Introduction to Systems Theory* help to draw deserved attention to Luhmann? The book is worth reading for many reasons, although it is probably more difficult than the title suggests (this is no material for undergraduate students).

The book, published in German in 2002, is the transcription of a lecture course delivered at Bielefeld University between 1991–92. In this context, Luhmann allowed himself to raise questions for which he then had no answer and to confess personal doubts on numerous occasions. For this reason, the text displays an oral quality which makes for a relaxed exposé, as Dirk Baecker mentions notes in his editorial preface. The fourteen original lectures are presented in seven uneven chapters. Luhmann begins by reviewing the development of systems theory over the 20th century. This leads him to scrutinize the legacy of Talcott Parsons. Luhmann moves on with a long presentation on systems theory. Afterwards, he examines a series of fundamental notions in sociology in order to update them in accordance with the framework he has just elaborated. The book is entirely devoted to a discussion of concepts as building blocks for theory.

To reclaim systems theory as a forgotten tradition, Luhmann poses the basic question: “what is a system?” He remarks that, very often, ancient models merely postulate the existence of systems as a way to justify research questions regarding certain features of social reality, such as stability or maintenance. The precise nature of systems is not properly accounted for. As a remedy, Luhmann suggests thinking of a system as the difference with an environment. He uses George Spencer-Brown’s terminology to define a system as a form. The form has two faces or sides, one internal and one external, while the system is located on the internal side. This asymmetry implies that the boundary separating the

system from the environment is in fact part of the system and not of the environment.

The next challenge is to figure out what sort of operation allows a social system to define itself as the difference with an environment by controlling this difference from within itself. This operation is communication, Luhmann tells us, considering how communication expands into a self-sustaining process. Indeed, each new single communication is simultaneously a reaction to some prior communication as well as an effort to precipitate further communication. Thus, social systems are systems of communication, so that the self-sustaining character of communication is at the same time the self-sustaining character of any social system. As a chain of communications continues to go along, a surplus of possibilities is released in the situation arising as a consequence of the operations of communication already produced up to this point. This surplus overburdens the on-going process, so that subsequent operations consist in selecting one of these options generated internally at the expense of others. This means: determining what is part of the system and what is not part on the basis of what has become possible to do inside the system, depending on past selections. This is self-production or autopoiesis: the system taps into the opportunities created by the system itself so as to open up an evolutionary path for itself.

Communication occurs whenever three moments coalesce: information, utterance, and understanding. Communication therefore implies the coordination of at least two persons: one to signal something and another one to follow up to this signal, possibly by rejecting it. Accordingly, communication as one singular event cannot be attributed to one single person, so that it cannot be admitted as a form of action (contra Habermas and speech act theory). What matters is not what you say or do at one moment in time, but how other people react to it (put differently, what you say or do as one person is never enough: something more is needed to produce communication). Hence, there is a gap between communication and human consciousness. Social systems produce themselves by means of communication, whereas consciousness is left in their environment. However, consciousness is not made superfluous. While consciousness is not in charge of communication, social systems depend on it to continuously feed them with irritations. The relation social systems have with their environment (and with human consciousness in it) is not causal, but ecological. It is possible for social systems to emerge at all because the parallel existence of human consciousness guarantees that there will always be enough disturbances for the process of communication to continue one way or another.

A particularly interesting development of Luhmann's theory is his treatment of observation. For Luhmann, the act of observing consists in marking a distinction as a two-sided form and indicating one side rather than the other (high or low, profit or lost, attractive or unattractive, etc.). Social systems are capable of handling such distinction/indication through their operations of communication. We can therefore speak of systems as observers in their own right. But since all systems are operationally closed on themselves, the reality that each of them observes turns out to be an internal construction specific to it. In this model, sociologists are observers just as well. They proceed to complete their task by observing social systems as other observers. The goal is to identify the particular distinctions that a system makes use of when carrying out its observations in order to understand how reality is created in the perspective of this observer; further, this requires one to understand how this reality comes to change as the system behind it evolves over time.

As it is made abundantly clear throughout the book, Luhmann's theory sheds new light on multiple issues in sociology, including: causality, time, socialization, language, and conflict. Two additional points must be noted. First, in the book, Luhmann explains what separates his works from older versions of systems theory. He gives no primacy to equilibrium or consensus. He is also explicitly critical of Parsons' AGIL model. Knowing this, it is obvious that to simply dismiss Luhmann's ideas as "structural functionalism all over again" would be deeply mistaken. Second, the book is particularly valuable in illustrating Luhmann's personal method. Luhmann reminds us that any theory is built out of a series of decisions regarding conceptual definitions. Additionally, he brings to our attention the pragmatic aspects of these decisions: there are not only theory decisions, but theory consequences too. For example, certain decisions can cause difficulties leading whole theories into dead-ends. Accordingly, in the business of theory design, one is well advised to proceed comparatively by surveying the history of ideas in depth in order to justify the decisions one makes in relation to the alternative options at hand. This is a lesson Luhmann gives by offering his own example. The result is not absolute knowledge, of course, but transparency in the way theory is put forward.

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