

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Niklas Luhmann, *Theory of Society*, Volume 1. Translated by Rhodes Barrett. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012, 488 pp. \$27.95 paper (9780804739504)

What is perhaps most impressive about Niklas Luhmann's *Theory of Society*, Volume 1 is the sheer ambition of the project. Especially read in light of the more substantive and (slightly!) less theoretical *Theory of Society*, Volume 2, it provides a theoretical framework to use in interdisciplinary social science to enable scholars to work with a more fulsome theory of society. While some chapters have been published previously, the first book edition was originally published in German in 1997. Now both volumes have been published for the first time in English in 2012 and 2013 respectively. This should give Anglophone sociological theorists much to debate as these books are chalked full of ideas about how contemporary sociology can reinvent itself around the quest for a rigorous theory of society.

Luhmann (1927–1998) limits his argument almost exclusively to the realm of sociological theory, that is, he avoids the normative and empirical implications of his work wherever possible. However, the level of theoretical abstraction this requires has implications in terms of the usual “readability” issues that Luhmann's challenging work is well known for. Yet, when compared to similar projects in scope, it is arguably no more unreadable than earlier so-called “totalizing” projects such as Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927), Parsons' *The Social System* (1951), and Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), to name major philosophical systems of comparable ambition and scope. Reviewing a book of this magnitude is without question an effort in humility and thus my review is limited to the first volume of *Theory of Society* including broad themes that constitute it.

A theory of society is something Luhmann sought to develop throughout his entire career beginning in the late 1960s; he explains: “my project was, and ever since has been, the theory of society; term: thirty years; costs: none” (p. xi). With this opening appeal stressing the importance of basic theoretical research in sociology, Luhmann's theory of society is itself based in systems theory that has become increasingly important in a variety of registers of thought including communications theory, the fundamental dialectic of “social differentiation” in which various semi-

autonomous aspects of society start to become autonomous, and, finally, the undecidable interplay between social systems and environment.

The theory of society proposed is one in which there is no centre in which to orient one's self; in other words, "'society' does not refer to a clear-cut idea" (p. 1). Furthermore, there exists no single realm in society — such as economics, politics, psychology, etc. — that does not make reference to other elements for its integrity. Luhmann aims to account for the totality of society while declining to posit any one centre in which this analysis could be located; this includes, most crucially, the sociologist making what for Luhmann are self-referential observations about society. In short, one of Luhmann's most basic polemics is to contest sociological accounts that elect themselves as the voice or representative of modern society itself.

The sociologist or "observer" is part of modern society and therefore should not see herself as a subject somehow outside of that which she studies. By continuing to miss this central insight provided by systems theory, Luhmann insists that contemporary sociological theory "failed to produce anything approaching an adequate theory of society," which therefore explains why "classical sociology has produced the only description of society to date" (p. 2). One of the few contextual arguments offered in support of this view is Luhmann's conviction that sociology has made substantial contributions to other disciplines both methodologically and empirically but "omitted to describe society as a whole" (p. 4). With that said, he does argue that if there is anything like a centre to society it must exist at the level of a circular notion or "autopoietic" (meaning, "self creating") system of communication. Using a radical constructionist epistemology, Luhmann argues that without communication itself there would be no modern society at all. Here, Luhmann has in mind the use in sociology of systems theory, chaos theory, non-linear mathematics, or evolution theory describing the formation of social structures (p. 12).

"Communication always communicates that it communicates" (p. xiii). This suggests that where there is communication — any communication at all — there is society. Communication, not the individual, is the bedrock of the theory of society from this perspective. This insight offers opportunities for application, and one example Luhmann develops at length is the importance to conceive of "world society" as a vast communicative system. Arguing that most contemporary sociologists today operate with a sloppy conception of society, he contends that it is no longer acceptable to retain the conventional model in sociology that limits society to an anthropological-based conception (Heidegger), the nation-state and territory (Giddens), or social behaviorism (Mead).

Because systems are never able to truly contain communication, the reasoning goes, it makes little sense to retain a concept of society as being contained by state boundaries or psychological states.

Rather, Luhmann argues that world society is “society” *per se*. He uses a regional analysis to look at a “centre-periphery pattern” within the broader world society; his theory of society explains the differing states of development amongst “various parts of the globe” (p. 93). There are places in the text where it becomes evident that Luhmann’s work has close affinities with Wallerstein’s world system theory and even Giddens’ work on globalization, but one of main ways Luhmann distinguishes his work is to describe “the global system as society” (p. 92). It is important to mention that Luhmann spends a good amount of energy espousing how his theory can help to explain the intensification of regional difference and social inequalities. Moments like this offset some of the speculation in contemporary sociological theory debates that Luhmann’s work is conservative in orientation.

Yet, there are other moments when Luhmann’s work does come off as conservative, or at least quietist. For example, he expends much energy in the book arguing that sociology should be limited to formulating explanations of society “as it exists” (p. 13). Normative questions, he argues, cannot be generated from outside of the social reality being investigated and thus sociology cannot “persist in opposition to society ... in resolute Frankfurt-style resignation” (p. 11). Normative statements must be generated from a theory of society that recognizes that sociologists and scientists are not located outside of society.

So, what, according to Luhmann, is a theory of society? On the basis of Volume 1, we can say that it is a theory formulated at the macro theoretical level that can better come to terms with new theories of communication, the emergence of world society, self-reference, and societal evolution through time. While Luhmann’s text is filled with innumerable insights about renewal within the discipline, it becomes apparent his theory of society does come at a price when considered in relation to the now dominant critical project in sociology. This becomes palpable in the lack of theorization — at least in this volume — about dominant themes in sociology about racialization, class (admittedly, addressed in Volume 2), and gender, as well as how to methodologically use theory for empirical projects. Yet, he does, as I have suggested, dedicate significant attention to questions of space, global society, and regionalism.

There is no reason why scholars asking these sorts of questions could not use Luhmann’s work as a theoretical resource. But the master himself has at most offered macro and, at times, suspiciously abstract theoretical suggestions for the study of inequality and exclusion at the global and

regional levels. One thing is clear about the *Theory of Society* when considered in relation to its profound scope and ambition: sociology finally has its very own grand theorist after Parsons to parallel the contemporary stature that system builders such as Heidegger or Sartre continue to enjoy in other related disciplines. Luhmann's impressive work deserves to be more widely read by sociologists today; this text would be suitable for advanced researchers interested in rethinking the sociological project from the ground up on the basis of systems and communication theory developed throughout the 20th century.

Barret Weber

Barret Weber currently teaches sociology at various institutions in Alberta. After recently completing his PhD, he remains passionate about teaching and researching social theory, northern studies in Canada, and gender and sexuality studies.

barretw@ualberta.ca