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Obituary. Niklas Luhmann (1927-1998)

Optimism of the Intellect, Pessimism of the Will

Openly dreaming of eternal life, Gaston Bachelard conceived of paradise as one huge library with miles of stacks and crammed with books. For Niklas Luhmann, the great German sociologist and metaphysician who recently passed away at the age of 70, after a protracted period of sickness, paradise probably looks more like an endless filing cabinet. Indeed, the man who represents in himself a successful one-man theory factory that has produced more than 40 books and at least 350 journal articles in less than 40 years, explains his immense productivity with a modest reference to his famous system of *Zettelkasten*, a system of file cards with thematic cross-references. Working daily from 8.30 till midday, when he goes for a walk with the dog, and from 14 till 23 hours, Luhmann declares that he has actually spent more time arranging and rearranging his system of file cards than writing books - several books at the same time, as when he gets stuck on one, he immediately starts another one. Most of those books are still not translated, and although his main book *Social Systems* has recently been published by Stanford University Press, most of his work is likely to remain untranslated (in English or French, but not necessarily in Italian and Spanish, where he can rely on a larger audience of social, political and legal theorists). The main reason for this remarkable neglect of one of the intellectual giants of our time is the sheer difficulty and complexity of Luhmann's characteristic brand of systems theory. Not that Luhmann writes jargon (à la Habermas) or long and complicated sentences (à la Bourdieu), but his theory is pitched at such a high level of abstraction and reflexivity that it is often hard to see its relevance, even for those who are used to more metaphysical bedtime readings. Moreover, Luhmann draws on a multiplicity of transdisciplinary traditions, such as general systems theory (Bertalanffy), second order cybernetics (Von Foerster), modular theory of logic (Spencer Brown) and constructivist theories of knowledge (Maturana and Varela), sociologists and philosophers are usually not well acquainted with. Finally, Luhmann's mode of presentation is nonlinear. One can enter the theory by a multiplicity of conceptual gates,

such as complexity, contingency, system, environment, meaning, communication, self-reference, openness through closure, and so forth, but as one can never be sure to be on the right track, one is often tempted to go for the next exit. In this respect the theory resembles indeed, as Luhmann himself says with his characteristic dry sense of humour, more to a labyrinth than to a highway to a happy end.

If Habermas is the leading German philosopher, Luhmann is the leading German sociologist. Together, they held a joint seminar in the beginning of the seventies at the Max Planck Institut in Starnberg. This resulted in a joint publication entitled *Theory of Society or Social Technology - What is achieved by Systems Theory?* (followed by 4 volumes of commentary on the debate) which sold more than thirty-five thousand copies in just a few years. The title, obviously chosen by Habermas, suggests that Luhmann's systems theory, which conceptualises the public sphere in such a way that legitimisation becomes an affair of the political system itself and thus a form of organised self-legitimation, represents the most sophisticated expression of the technocratic spirit. Although a biography is always an accumulation of contingent events, steered by openness towards serendipity, Luhmann was in fact destined to become a technocrat. He studied law at Freiburg (1946-1949) and worked for several years as a civil servant at the Ministry of Education and Culture of Lower Saxony (1956-1962). In 1960-1961, he spent a year at Harvard University, where he encountered Talcott Parsons. This meeting, together with his preoccupation with philosophy (Descartes, Kant and especially Husserl) and early functionalist anthropology (Malinowski and Radcliff-Brown), led Luhmann into a career as sociologist. His sociology is in fact best understood as a synthesis of Husserlian transcendental phenomenology and functionalist systems theory, thus as a kind of cybernetic phenomenology in which the system takes the place of the transcendental ego - with all the problems of solipsism which such a systemic reformulation of Husserl entails. Having successfully defended a Ph.D. and a Habilitation thesis under the direction of Helmut Schelsky, Luhmann qualified on the fast track at the University of Munster and then, in 1969, he became professor in sociology at the newly founded University of Bielefeld.

If Habermas is the Kant of social theory, Luhmann is its Hegel (see the obituary of *Die Zeit* of 19/11/98). 'Society', 'communication' and 'system' replace 'spirit', 'substance' and 'history'. Like Hegel, he wants to bring the present time to its highest conceptual level and incorporate the entire universe in his system. But unlike Hegel, his last word is not identity but difference - the 'difference of identity and difference'. Luhmann's social theory is a systemic 'supertheory' of the social with universal pretensions. This theory is universal in that it is a theory of everything, of the world, as seen and reconstructed from the standpoint of sociology. This theory of everything is also a supertheory. It is not only able to conceptualise everything that is social (not only stratification and class, conflict and consensus, modes of interaction and organisation) but also the existing theories of the social, including itself as a contingent part of the reality it describes. And this supertheory of everything is a systemic theory because it uses the 'guiding difference' (*Leitdifferenz*) between the system and the environment as its main conceptual tool to analyse the production and reproduction of the social. Analysing society as a hypercomplex conglomerate of social subsystems, Luhmann insists that modern societies are so complex that his own theory of social complexity can only offer one possible formulation of the social among others. In fact, his theory of society is only a subtheory of sociology, which is a subsystem of science, which is a subsystem of society.

Luhmann's basic attitude towards the world is one of ironic distance. His basic vision of the world is one of wonder. Everything that is could in principle be different. But in practice there is not much that could make a difference. How this 'optimism of the intellect' is countered by a 'pessimism of the will' can be seen in his almost cynical appreciation of the defeat of the Third Reich. Unlike Habermas, who describes himself without irony as a typical product of post-war re-education, Luhmann provocatively declares that he remembers only one thing about the liberation - that American soldiers beat him up and stole his watch. At the most abstract level, Luhmann's social theory, which conceives of itself as an 'auto-logical' self-description of society, offers a systemic analysis of the social ordering of chaos through the reduction of complexity into a contingent cosmos. The imaginary starting point of Luhmann's theorising is a situation of utter chaos and complexity. In the beginning, the world is a complex manifold

comprising the totality of all possible events. This world of infinite possibilities is not a real world. To become a real world, the complexity has to be reduced to such an extent that a relatively ordered world emerges. This reduction of complexity is effectuated through communication. Communication is a social achievement. Through communication contingency is reduced. Some possibilities are realised, others are excluded, and the world becomes relatively predictable. Communications produce communications, and when those can be connected to each other and structured in a relatively predictable way, society emerges. Society is made up of communications and nothing but communications. Elephants, fish and chips or cars do not belong to society. What is not a communication does not belong to society but to its environment. At this fateful point, systems theory takes an anti-humanist turn and breaks with the philosophy of consciousness. If society is made up of communications, people are definitively not. They thus belong to the environment. And if they belong to the environment, they do not communicate. Only communications communicate, and given that society is nothing else but the totality of the communications, people are not only rejected out of society, but they can hardly intervene in it either.

The environment is always more complex than the system itself. Given that there is no point-to-point correspondence between the system and its environment, the system cannot react to every event in its environment. If it wants to maintain itself, it has to maintain its boundaries, operate a clear demarcation between itself and the environment, and be selective in its relations with the environment. What belongs to the environment is selectively perceived and reduced in complexity by the system which, thanks to this difference from the environment, is able to affirm its identity and enhance its internal complexity. When the distinction between the environment and the system is reproduced within the system, the system is 'outdifferentiated' (*ausdifferenziert*) and subsystems emerge that, thanks to functional specialisation and sectorial delimitation of their spheres of interest and disinterest, are able to further reduce the complexity of the environment by specifying which communications belong to the system and which do not, i.e. by selectively attributing each element of the world either to the system itself or to its environment. The functional scope of social subsystems is defined and delimited by means of a binary code

(plus operational program). Thus, for instance, in the same way as the political and the economic subsystems delimit their exclusive spheres of interest and disinterest on the basis of the application of binary codes, respectively government/opposition (plus elections) and payment/non payment (plus prices), the juridical subsystem is only concerned with those elements of reality which can be subsumed under the headings of the binary code of legal/illegal (plus laws) which govern(s) the legal system. All other elements of reality, such as religion, ethics, politics, economics, science, intimate relations, etc. that cannot be subsumed under the legal code are screened out and delegated for treatment to the other subsystems. Thus, the whole world is selectively carved up and treated functionally by a plurality of autonomous subsystems.

Once social subsystems are constituted through `re-entry` of the distinction of the system and the environment within the system, they maintain and reproduce themselves by producing the elements of which they are made up. Made up of communications, they regulate the succession of communications that are operative in the system in the same way as cells, which are made up of macro-molecules, regulate the production of macro-molecules that replace the decaying ones, maintaining thus their unity and autonomy as cells even though the elements of which they are made up are constantly replaced by newly produced ones. Producing the elements that reproduce the systems, they are thus self-referential or, to use Maturana and Varela's classic concept, autopoietic systems. Autopoietic systems can be defined in typical reflexive lingo as systems that produce and maintain themselves by producing out of the elements of which they are made up the elements of which they are made up. Transposing the autopoietic conception of systems from the domain of biology to the domain of sociology, the giant of Bielefeld redefines social systems as radically temporised autopoietic systems. Social systems are radically temporised systems, because they use time to reduce complexity by spreading their selective operations over time. Notwithstanding the short span of the communications of which they are made up, they maintain their continuity over time by continually replacing the vanishing communications by new ones. The endogenous restlessness of the systems is thus coupled to their constant reproduction. And they are autopoietic systems, because the disintegrating communications are replaced not by other ones that are the same, but

by other ones that are different and that connect to the former in such a way that a self-referential chain of communications is obtained. Autopoietic systems are by definition self-referentially or organisationally closed systems. They recursively constitute the elements of which they are made up by circular reference to their own self-reproduction as autonomous systems of communications. Paradoxically, this self-closure of the system is a precondition for its opening to the environment. Concretely, this means that as an autonomous and self-determining unity, the system can only react to the `provocations` of the environment in accordance with its own mode of operation. The environment cannot influence the system directly but only indirectly in so far as the self-referentially closed system opens itself up to the environment and allows it from within to selectively influence the system from without. In other words, the system can only communicate about the environment within itself. It cannot communicate with the environment. Like Husserl's transcendental ego, it can only conceive of alterity in terms of identity and difference, with the result that the whole world is eventually encompassed in the system but in such a way that the world is reduced to an autistic world of self-referentially closed autopoietic subsystems that cannot more communicate with each other than monads can. Although subsystems are interlocked through their effects and intersystemic resonances, they are nevertheless walled off from each other through their functional modes and binary codes. Insofar as information cannot be transferred directly from one subsystem to another but is always differentially perceived, internally reconstructed and binarily recoded by another system, any attempt by one subsystem to represent another one or to steer its operations is conceptually precluded. Society has no centre and no head. Representation of the social totality is impossible and so is steering. The world may be adrift like a ship without moorings, but given that there is and can no longer be a captain on board to co-ordinate and steer the operations of the different subsystems, the rhetoric of anxiety of the critical theorists only show the superfluity of their own normative mode of thought and their incapacity to come to terms with the hypercomplexity of modern societies. The functional specialisation has increased the rationality of each of the social subsystems but only at the price of the irrationality of the global system. That is the ultimate and demoralising message of `sociological enlightenment` which aims to enlighten the Enlightenment by uncovering the limits of

Old European thought through a systemic critique of its philosophical foundations - whether this sociological critique if critical theory is also socially enlightening is another question which Luhmann refuses to engage with. His systems theory literally demoralises the world. Luhmann has given up hope and given away the normative foundations of social criticism. In exchange we get a kind of romanticism without nostalgia and its methodological complement, irony, that shows us again and again the improbability of the probable, but hardly or never the possibility of the improbable. In this respect, Luhmann follows Nietzsche, and joins the ranks of the postmodernists: In the beginning anything goes, but at the end nothing can happen.

Selective Bibliography

The most complete Luhmann-bibliography counts 1131 entries. See `Gesamtverzeichnis der Veröffentlichungen Niklas Luhmanns 1958-1992`, in Dammann, K., Grunow, D. and Japp, K. (eds.): *Die Verwaltung des politischen Systems* (Westdeutscher Verlag, Opladen, 1994, pp. 282-382). Luhmann's oeuvre is best conceived as a single project in social theory which consists of four parts. The first part, its general introduction so to say, is presented in *Soziale Systeme. Grundriss einer allgemeinen Theorie (Social Systems. Outline of General Theory)*. In this difficult book, published by Suhrkamp in 1984, Luhmann systematically transposes the conception of autopoietic systems from the domain of biology to social theory. The second part, which consists of a systemic analysis of society, is worked out in *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft (The Social System of Society)*, Luhmann's sociological testament, published in 2 volumes in 1997 by Suhrkamp - a first co-authored version appeared in 1992 in Italian under the title *Teoria della società*). The third part consists of a series of books, also published by Suhrkamp, in which Luhmann presents a comparative analysis of the different subsystems of society. The main books of part 3 are respectively devoted to the economy (*Die Wirtschaft der Gesellschaft* (1988) - *The Social System of the Economy*), science (*Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft* (1990) - *The Social System of Science*), law (*Das Recht der Gesellschaft* (1993)- *The Social System of Law*) and art (*Die Kunst der Gesellschaft* (1995)- *The Social System of Art*). The last part of the project has been worked out in a series of essays,

republished in five volumes by Suhrkamp under the title *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik. Studien zur Wissenssoziologie der modernen Gesellschaft*, 1-5 (*Social Structure and Semantics. Studies in the Sociology of knowledge of Modern Society*) in which Luhmann explores the socio-historical variation of the social self-descriptions by means of a scholarly analysis of the cultural semantics. Different aspects of this project in social theory have been explored in an impressive collection of essays which have been republished in a series of 6 books under the title *Soziologische Aufklärung, 1-6 (Sociological Enlightenment*; all published by Westdeutscher Verlag). I would recommend that English speaking readers who are unacquainted with Luhmann's work start with the main essays of *The Differentiation of Society* (Columbia University Press, 1982) and *Essays on Self-Reference* (Columbia University Press, 1990), then move on to *Ecological Communication* (University of Chicago Press, 1989) which not only presents the main ideas of *Social Systems* (Stanford University Press, 1995) in more accessible fashion but like *Risk. A Sociological Theory* (de Gruyter, 1993) also offers a good introduction to Luhmann's diagnosis of modernity. *Observations on Modernity* (Stanford University Press, 1998) offers not only a reasonably accessible introduction to Luhmann's latest interest in the paradoxical implications of 'second order cybernetics' but gives also a good feeling of how Luhmann intervenes in the debate on postmodernism.

Frédéric Vandenberghe, Brunel University