

"What is actually so distinctively societal about society?" : Niklas Luhmann's *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*

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**“WHAT IS ACTUALLY SO DISTINCTIVELY
SOCIETAL ABOUT SOCIETY?”
NIKLAS LUHMANN’S *DIE GESELLSCHAFT DER GESELLSCHAFT***

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Having published more than a dozen books and numerous journal articles in the last thirty years of his life, Niklas Luhmann, Professor of Sociology at the University of Bielefeld (Germany), was one of the most industrious, if not the most industrious sociologist of recent times. Most of his published material seems to be elaborative and attempts to spell out the valuable information that his famous Zettelkasten contained (Zettelkasten being ‘file cards in a box’, in Luhmann’s case probably itself an ‘autopoietic system’) – hence the reader’s impression of reading one long book published in instalments. Yet, having said this, it would be unfair to portray Luhmann’s work solely as an extension of one original idea or thought. Occasionally Luhmann desisted from dryly spelling out the mechanics of autopoietic systems – and it is then that he really delivered. One does not have to be one of the many Luhmann disciples (often of sectarian calibre) to appreciate that his *Social Systems* (1996), *Ecological Communication* (1989), or his essays on sociological and historical semantics (published as *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik*, 1980/1981) are more than a contribution towards another Hegel-like system in sociological theory. Particularly with Luhmann’s last book – which can be regarded as his magnum opus, – we are given a firm sounding board from which to explore why it is that Luhmann’s work appears to hold such considerable interest for ‘Luhmannians’ and non-Luhmannians alike. In what follows, I will try to summarise what I regard to be the most valuable and constructive arguments in Luhmann’s last book and in a final comment will then briefly debate what I hold to be problematic in grand theory in general and in Luhmann’s approach in particular.

Anyone interested in social theory and in particular the great debates between Habermas and Luhmann (*Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie*, 1975) believed that after Habermas’ *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984/1987) and Luhmann’s *Social Systems* everything that had to be said, had been said, and that any further contributions remain as elaborations of their respective approaches. While this may be the case for Jürgen Habermas, who then delivered one book on law (*Between Facts and Norms*, 1996) and another on politics (*Die Einbeziehung des Anderen*, 1996), which were certainly variations on his

original theme, the same does not hold true for Niklas Luhmann, who after *Social Systems*, went on to publish studies, such as the ones on risk society (*Risk: a sociological theory*, 1993) and modernity (*Beobachtungen der Moderne*, 1992), but then surpassed himself by presenting his new, 1'164 page book, entitled *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*.

The title itself needs some explanation and it is my contention that the central leitmotiv of Luhmann's social theory is hidden in this remarkable wortspiel. *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* literally translated means 'The Society of Society'; yet this translation would not be wholly in keeping with the author's intention. In English, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* must be completely rephrased in order for it to make sense. "What is actually so distinctively societal about society?" seems to me to be a truer interpretation – despite not being a literal translation.

It is not necessarily arrogant of Luhmann to state that the problem of what 'societal' means has rarely been addressed in sociology – a discipline which purports to deal mainly with 'the social' and or 'the societal'. Neither Jürgen Habermas, nor Anthony Giddens (to name just two major names in contemporary social theory) sought to even pose this question. They may well have considered the different constitutive elements of society, but the question of exactly what constitutes the societal of society remains unanswered.

Luhmann is certainly more of a pure sociologist compared to his aforementioned contemporaries in that he does not treat sociology in the old style of the sociology of knowledge or in a purely hermeneutic fashion; he treats it rather as a self-descriptive enterprise where sociology itself becomes just one of the many constitutive parts and thereby re-enters society not with a monopoly of interpretation but merely as one of the possible vantage points.

The next step in Luhmann's reasoning follows on logically from this radical paradigm change: If it is true that sociology is just one of many possible self-descriptions, how can it then claim to speak of the truth, or of the higher purposes of reason? How can it claim to be more knowledgeable and/or even more humanistically oriented than other self-descriptions of society? And finally, why should sociology continue to contribute to the betterment of the world when it is seen as no longer holding the monopoly on interpreting it?

To be sure, Luhmann does not resolve these questions, yet he deserves the credit for at least addressing them. In that Luhmann's proposals truly know no secularised gods such as 'reason' or 'emancipation' and is also truly pluralistic, his approach is – at least in the realm of social theory – certainly more democratically founded than that of any of his contemporaries in the field.

Luhmann develops his arguments in *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* in five steps. In the first chapter, entitled “Society as a Social System”, the author introduces the main concepts in an attempt to explain autopoietic systems and to explore how they relate to social systems and to society in particular. Meaning (Sinn) becomes the essential operating resource for social systems, because it is only through meaning that one can distinguish between actual performance and possibility, and between existence and non-existence. Meaning then becomes the *sine qua non*, the first and last reference point for distinguishing one autopoietic system from another.

The author accordingly defines autopoietic systems as systems which produce and reproduce not only their structures but also their constitutive elements through precisely those same structures and elements. Autopoiesis is, in Luhmann-speak, “the production of the system through itself”. There is no input or out-put, and neither do individual elements exist independently or have a life of their own; they only function in and through the system.

The social system called ‘society’ is as such a self-referential system. It is differentiated by a number of operations not known to other autopoietic systems – the most important one being communication. Society then is “a communicative closed system” (Luhmann), generated through communication itself. It stands out from its environment through ‘clusters of communication’ which have evolved over time.

To be sure, the whole ontological tradition of western civilisation is thrown into doubt here. Whereas in the past the subject thought about the object or the outside world (the idealists’ view), or alternatively, where the object, i. e. the social world, became a constitutive element for the thinking subject (the materialists’ view) – these traditional western subject-object relationships now become irrelevant with Luhmann’s change of paradigm. In Luhmann, there is no longer such a thing as ‘the subject’ or ‘the individual’. Rather, individual human beings become radically redefined as elements of the social system. Where Habermas regards communication as essential for both the system and the life-world (the former using communication as a resource for the purpose of strategic action, the latter as a practically purpose-free liberating resource) Luhmann goes much further than that: for him communication is not limited to intersubjectivity and therefore is greater than the sum of the communicating individuals. What applies to the ‘micro-level’ of individual human beings – intersubjectivity and interaction –, logically applies to the ‘macro-level’ of society as well. For Luhmann, communication does not stop at national boundaries: the social system called society can only be conceived of as a global one – a global society internally differentiated but nevertheless operating as one.

In order to fully grasp the functioning of society as a social system, one has to look at the three most important features (as indeed they appear in three consecutive chapters in *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*) communication, evolution and internal differentiation. Again, communication is perceived differently from Habermas. For Luhmann, any talk of individual forms of rationality within the system of communication needs to be avoided. This, as the author insists, makes the case for communication even stronger, since no normative aspects enter into the analysis from ‘outside’.

But why, one must ask, is it that the author still claims communication as the crucial element and distinctive feature of social systems? The answer is simple: for Luhmann communication systems are important because they continuously produce more communication. The distinction between medial substance and the content of communication is crucial in this respect. Only due to the fact that the form of communication is principally connectable and not the content, is it possible for meaning to become prolonged and eventually develop into something which is actually happening. This then seems to be the core of Luhmann’s argument: society as a meaningful system can emerge and reproduce itself only through the medium of communication.

Bearing in mind that the author reinforces the notion that the communication system is greater than the sum of the communicating individuals, Luhmann thus frees the individuals from the heavy burden of having anything in common resulting from the normative dimensions of language and speech acts. Rather it is autopoietic communication systems which make the “almost impossible possible” (Luhmann): namely the emergence of society.

But apart from the absence of normative aspects – where else does Luhmann differ from Habermas? The answer to this question is to be found in the chapter on communication media where Luhmann differentiates between different types, or better still: ‘clusters’ of communication. A scheme is presented within a framed table. The frame is split between the two alternatives of action/reaction which Ego and Alter are confronted with: this being either to experience (*Erleben*) or to act (*Handeln*); various combinations and constellations are possible, the main lines of which are established within the table: 1. ‘truth’ and ‘values’ (resulting from a combination where both Alter and Ego experience) 2. ‘love’ (where Alter experiences and Ego acts), 3. ‘property’/‘money’ and ‘art’ (where Alter acts and Ego experiences), and 4. ‘power’/‘law’ (where both Alter and Ego act).

Table 1
Clusters of Communication

Alter	Ego	
	to experience	to act
to experience	(Ae→Ee) truth, values	(Ae→Ea) love
to act	(Aa→Ee) property/money, art	(Aa→Ea) power, law

(From: *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, Vol. I, p. 336)

To fully comprehend the scheme one must know that in this model the element of communication travels from Alter to Ego: Alter first has to communicate something which Ego can then understand and accept or reject. What also must be taken into account is that there is not one field which has a priority status over the other. The Habermasian distinction between lifeworld (consisting of truth, values and love) and the system (property/money, power and law) is made redundant in Luhmann’s scheme. Luhmann’s view of communication becomes thus less loaded with normativity than Habermas’. Yet, if one takes into account that we are dealing with an abstract scheme which cannot express all possible communication flows, Luhmann’s scheme is not wholly without values or morals. It is only that they do not enter abruptly, according to certain forms of communication (as they do in Habermas) or as ‘saving’ moments in the last instance; rather they become “free floating” (Luhmann) and are able to enter the communication processes at any place at any given point in time. Love, for example, can appear in the same sphere as money, while power can also enter in love relationships – hence most of the conflicts in modern society.

As has been stressed, it would be a misunderstanding to perceive Luhmann’s model of communication as static. In the following chapters devoted to ‘Evolution’ and ‘Differentiation’, Luhmann addresses the processual dimension of the social system called ‘society’. He rejects the idea that the processes of society can be understood and explained in terms of causal mechanisms and factors. Rather the author sees society as emerging from what he calls “loose couplings”. The term ‘loose couplings’ refers to the fact that sufficient preconditions must have developed in order to allow formations to evolve. In Luhmann’s newspeak: “High probability (must) become dense expectancy.”(Vol. 1, p. 417) There is thus no teleology, no predictions and no ‘final stage’ in the evolutionary process. Since there are non-intentional effects, resulting from unforeseeable circumstances and constellations, nothing can be predicted; everything develops out of ‘loose couplings’. Yet this does not

mean that everything is possible. To be sure, there are structures and constellations to be taken into account; yet these structures only make particular 'connecting operations' more likely to happen than others and, furthermore, it is their function to reduce complexity.

Sociology as a discipline can be regarded as an attempt to come to terms with complex systems by observing and conceptualising the differentiation of the aforementioned evolutionary process. Yet, the concept of 'differentiation' itself needs some explanation. According to Luhmann we must not understand differentiation in terms of 'the whole and its parts' but rather as a process, whereby "every part of the system reproduces the entire system to which it belongs". (Vol. 2, p. 598) Once one understands how differentiation works, one can then take a closer look at how the complex social system called society emerges. The inner core of Niklas Luhmann's sociology (if there is such a thing in an autopoietic system) has been reached. In a series of sub-chapters (particularly instructive are the chapters on 'Inclusion and Exclusion', 'Stratified Societies', 'Further Differentiation of Functional Systems', 'Functional Differentiated Society', 'Autonomy and Structural Links', 'Irritations and Values', 'Globalisation and Regionalisation'), Luhmann spells out how differentiation and complexity evolved.

Yet one last set of questions has remained unresolved so far: how can one conceive of a process of evolution and differentiation when social theorists are themselves elements of the social system they observe? How can we make sense of the evolutionary and differential process when we ourselves cannot observe it from outside? Luhmann provides us with an answer in his final chapter of *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*. It is here that Luhmann is at his best: having dismissed the classic notion of the 'subject-observes-object' approach, he is in no position to re-introduce it through the back-door. Luhmann therefore turns to 'self-descriptions' for the purpose of differentiating between the many attempts at self-observation and self-description of society. Luhmann presents his argument in a way which provides some remarkable insights – particularly since his tool is mainly historical semantics. No stone remains unturned – be it 'risk society', 'modernisation', 'nation-states', 'classes' or other 'paradoxes of identity'. Yet Luhmann is extremely careful not to be 'sucked' into the trappings of the different sociological arguments. He shows certain empathy for them, but he is cautious not to exhibit too much sympathy for any of the various descriptions of society. Through this caution and perhaps respect, Luhmann must be seen as more pluralistic and democratically oriented than Giddens or Habermas could ever be – at least in the realm of social thought.

With *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* Luhmann has presented a thorough and internally convincing model which serves as a tool with which to analyse society. It is special in that it can be seen as one of German sociology's doyens' last attempt to consider all aspects of society together; and in its almost Hegelian fashion and in its attempt to understand and conceptualise society, it must be seen as the highest peak of theorising within the grand theory tradition of German sociology. Yet, as with all grand theory, some concerns still remain. Having said that Luhmann's approach appears to be considerably more societal in its understanding and conceptualisation of the development of communication flows, and having further said that Luhmann appears to be more pluralistic and possibly even more democratic in his theorising than Habermas, Giddens or Bourdieu, this does not necessarily mean that this approach is free from other pitfalls. Having re-introduced only “‘low-level’ normativity” back into the various aspects of the social system called society, Luhmann pays a high price: that of relativity and cynicism – in short what C. Wright Mills once called ‘the higher immorality’. To use one example to illustrate this point: All things being equal, the author is convinced that Luhmann and his followers will, for example, surely have no problem in approaching the two evolutionary ‘peaks’ of societal differentiation in the 20th Century, Stalinism and National Socialism. Yet one can already sense the cynical results of an analysis which conceptualises these two social systems under the heading of the ‘reduction of complexity’. What remains then of Luhmann's approach, is a highly sophisticated attempt to conceptualise society; yet it is also a grand theory which finds its weaknesses when applied to extreme circumstances. The implications are obvious when indeed one considers that it is the 20th Century that has been labelled the ‘age of extremes’.

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