

Observing Luhmann
The Endogenous restlessness of systems theory
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This paper observes Luhmann observing society. The main point is that Luhmann was an experimental observer, who untiringly tried out different theoretically informed observational positions. For him theory was the lens through which society could be observed, and he changed lenses through his whole career.

One of the consequences was that it is hard to identify a fixed theoretical “phase” in Luhmann’s oeuvre. It is often stated that there were three main positions: One was the phase of Parsons-inspired neo-functionalism. Another was the Maturana-inspired phase of autopoiesis. A third was the Spencer Brown inspired form-theoretical phase. However, one cannot find a “pure” single phase in any of Luhmann’s major contributions, and still in *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* one finds a mixture of functionalism, autopoiesis (expressed through the two basic concepts operative closure and structural coupling) and form theory.

Another consequence of his experimental approach was that Luhmann was explicitly and untiringly self-critical. Again and again he returned to and critically evaluated the most basic assumptions in his own theoretical complex. For instance, concerning the concepts of operative closure and structural coupling, in one of his lectures Luhmann stated that as a result of the focus on operative closure, theory is forced to compensate. Thus structural coupling is a compensatory concept (Luhmann 2002: 267). In *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* he states that operative closure creates a “difficult question” concerning the possibility of social systems. And: “Auf eine schwierige Frage antwortet ein schwieriger Begriff” – structural coupling (Luhmann 1997: 100).

In the paper I will focus on the basic problematic concerning system and environment, which has been expressed in the conceptual pairs of autopoiesis and interpenetration, of operative closure and structural coupling, and of indication/distinction and re-entry. I will focus particularly on the way in which these concepts are used and interchange in *Soziale Systeme*, in *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* and in *Das Erziehungssystem der Gesellschaft* (which has recently been published in a Danish translation with an introduction written by me to Luhmann’s theory of society and of the educational system), and I will evaluate the contribution of these concepts to the theory of education, i.e. to the structural coupling of teaching and learning. Compared with this pair, a main advantage of the conceptual pair indication/distinction and re-entry is that here the conceptual distinction is fired back into itself, thus expressing the endogenous restlessness of social systems.

In conclusion I intend to demonstrate:

- That Luhmann was an empirically oriented theoretician, who restlessly experimented with theoretical lenses for the observation of society.
- That one never finds a fixed theoretical architecture in Luhmann’s oeuvre. He was always in between positions.
- That Luhmann didn’t treat Husserl as a philosopher, but as a theoretician whose concepts could be transformed into social theoretical concepts in order to fire social theory with energy (cf. Luhmann 1996). As a basic example, Luhmann took the

concept of the endogenous restlessness of consciousness and transformed it into a concept of the endogenous restlessness of social systems. His intention was not to “solve” an epistemological problem, but to transform a set of concepts from subject philosophy to social theory in order to fuel social theory with energy.

- That although there are always two criteria in play in Luhmann’s contributions, epistemological plausibility and analytical productivity, the latter criterion seems to be more important. As Luhmann once stated: I don’t feel at home in philosophical auditoria. One cannot look out. Although in the introduction to *Soziale Systeme* Luhmann ironically states that most of his theoretical flight takes place above the clouds, still he certainly preferred a window seat.

Literature:

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