

“Ich denke primär historisch”:

On the uses of Luhmann’s theory in historical-sociological research

It is currently difficult to bring up the work of Niklas Luhmann in the global scientific community. Of course, there are different reactions. There are a number of people who entirely identify themselves with Luhmann. They describe themselves, for example, as “Luhmaniac” or as the “true Niklas Luhmann”. Others take their point of departure in Luhmann, they copy his way of asking questions, but pretend to provide better answers than Luhmann did and often also claim that Luhmann’s analyses were entirely flawed. At the same time, there are a number of people who react in a very hostile way to everything or everybody associated with Niklas Luhmann. When submitting an article or applying for a grant, it might be necessary to avoid any reference to Niklas Luhmann or to systems theory in order not to give away any chance of success from the very beginning. People who are able to discuss Luhmann’s work in a sophisticated way constitute a very small minority. All in all, it is difficult to find in the global scientific community specific niches which are supportive of a careful and informed discussion of Luhmann’s work.

In part, this state of affairs might be a result of the way in which Niklas Luhmann presented his own theory. Especially in his later work, Luhmann distanced himself from other sociological writings and traditions (notably, from the sociological ‘classics’). He introduced new concepts and used unfamiliar approaches, claiming to leave behind much of what is sometimes termed ‘normal’ science, ‘normal’ sociology (Th. Kuhn). But this way, the marginalization of his own work in the scientific community also seems to have become much easier. One way to contribute to an assessment of Luhmann’s work might be by revealing how Luhmann arrived at particular choices, how he made use of other sociological traditions, in which regards he distanced himself from his predecessors and/or other contemporary scientists, etc. This goes for the four ‘paradigms’ which are constitutive of his theory of society (communication, evolution, differentiation, self-description). Such contributions are important in order to counteract the aforementioned reactions and to avoid that his work gets entirely relegated to the margins of the discipline.

In my own work, I have tried to make some such contributions. In the last years, most of my attention has gone to issues related to those discussed in the last chapters of Luhmann’s *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*: the chapters on differentiation forms and self-descriptions. With regard to these issues, the explanatory power of Luhmann’s theory of society remains in my view unmatched. But it is helpful to use a broad concept of self-description or semantics in order to include different ‘popular’ observation or classification schemes (such as population statistics). Helpful, too, are comparative-historical analyses that focus on the existing range of reactions to similar problems and on the rationale behind particular reactions in particular regions at particular points in time. Such analyses are able to display the contingency of specific trajectories as well as the limitations of deterministic or teleological explanations. Such comparative-historical analyses also make it necessary to pay attention to relations between, and existing combinations of, different differentiation forms. It is my impression that the publication of this kind of historical-sociological work makes it possible to advance the knowledge of Luhmann’s theory in the scientific community and to add a few things to the systems-theoretical understanding of society.

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