

### **Niklas Luhmann's *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*: Ten Years After**

An International Conference, organized by the University of Lucerne (Gaetano Romano, Rudolf Stichweh) and the University Witten/Herdecke (Dirk Baecker, Michael Hutter),  
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*"Ihr Verhältnis zur Gesellschaft müßte die Soziologie als ein lernendes, nicht als ein belehrendes begreifen. Sie müßte die vorgefundenen Probleme analysieren, eventuell verschieben, eventuell in unlösbare Probleme verwandeln, auch ohne zu wissen, wie man dann trotzdem 'wissenschaftlich geprüfte' Lösungen anbieten könnte. Für all das braucht man eine theoretisch fundierte Beschreibung der modernen Gesellschaft." (Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft, S. 22)*

In 1997 Niklas Luhmann published his chef d'œuvre **Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft**. This two-volume book finalized a project which he had pursued for thirty years, his project of a sociological theory of society, a theory building effort, which, as he maintained, has not been undertaken since the 19th century abandoned the 18th century's attempts to develop a concept of society in terms of contemporary political economy. Classical sociologists - Gabriel Tarde, Emile Durkheim, Georg Simmel, and Max Weber among them - refused to speak of "the society" in any understanding that could raise the suspicion that one postulated a concrete entity out there in social space called by this name of "society". Instead, they spoke of society with regard to any process consisting of elements bound together by some kind of mutual orientation. Talcott Parsons added to this by saying that a system is to be called a society as soon as it is self-contained (as in Aristotle's notion of *koinonia*). Yet, such an approach leaves sociology without a theory of society as a social system of its own kind, producing and reproducing its own unity among a multitude of other social systems, permanently trying to come to terms with both its internal and its external environment.

In five chapters Luhmann sets out to develop his theory of society. Starting on the premise that society is not to be considered as consisting of individuals, while nevertheless having its "central problem" (p. 19) in individuals bound to be individuals (i.e., unbound), he first of all, in "Gesellschaft als soziales System", identifies important notions like operational closure, structural coupling, ecological relations of society, complexity, rationality, and world society, which somehow set the challenges the theory must be able to deal with. The second chapter, "Kommunikationsmedien", deals with all kinds of improbabilities which society, via media of communication, has to turn into probabilities in order not to fail, again and again, in reproducing itself. The third chapter, "Evolution", inquires into the question of how a neodarwinist theory of evolution has to look like, if it is to be applied to, and developed from the point of view of a social system like society. The fourth chapter, "Differenzierung", develops once again Niklas Luhmann's central notion of a functionally differentiated modern society and looks at earlier stages of society's differentiation as well as at consequences of functional differentiation for society, for interaction, organization, and protest movements. The fifth

and concluding chapter, "Selbstbeschreibungen", somehow is paying tribute to the very "Old Europe" Luhmann nevertheless was certain to have to leave behind to be able to understand the evolution of modern society. It describes the semantics premodern European society used to handle its problems of reproduction, it identifies the deconstructive meaning of notions like that of the subject, of the nation, or of class with respect to premodern society, and it looks at how modernity and mass media, on one hand, and the notions of information and observer, on the other, may prove worthwhile in developing a semantics that is more up to date to presentday society's way to deal with its own problems.

Our conference starts from this theoretical corpus which may be decomposed into four paradigms (communication, evolution, differentiation, self-description) constitutive of the theory of society. We ask you as a potential contributor to look at one of these four paradigms or at the interrelations between these paradigms and to concentrate your contribution on one of the following two tasks or on both if this is fruitful for your undertaking: Firstly, to situate the four paradigms - in which Luhmann believed and on which he did continuous theoretical and empirical work for at least three decades – in our contemporary scientific environment of other theoretical and interdisciplinary endeavours and to evaluate from such a comparative point of view how much Luhmann's theory achieved and how it has to be changed and corrected from the point of view of these competing and complementary approaches. Secondly, to refer the four paradigms to your own ongoing theoretical and empirical research and to demonstrate how you do research work with these paradigms, which insights are to be derived from making use of these paradigms and which is the balance sheet arising from the work you do. Which are the strengths and which are the weaknesses of Luhmann's understanding, and which options do you see to work on the strengths and to correct the weaknesses?

The conference will be held in English and in German and if someone prefers to speak French this will be possible, too. Proposals are accepted in the same three languages.

A title of the proposal and an abstract of the problems pursued should be sent to one of the organizers until December 1, 2006.

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