

NIKLAS LUHMANN 1927-1998
Obituary Written for the ISA
by
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[ISA Research Committee 51 on Sociocybernetics](#)

Introduction

The death of Niklas Luhmann on November 6, 1998 was a great loss. He was a most important contemporary intellectual leader and representative of systems science in sociology. Indeed, his influence extended far beyond sociology.

We owe a great debt to Niklas Luhmann for numerous important findings, breakthroughs, and intellectual challenges. Again and again he opened surprising views and new perspectives to sociology, systems science, and numerous other disciplines. He was one of the very few contemporary sociologists who indeed changed paradigms: from structural-functionalism to functional-structural and problem-functionalist theory, from the society of action to the society of communication and semantics, from the social "machine" to autopoiesis. Some of these changes may seem only to be playing with words, and yet this shifting of terms changed worlds.

He was a sharp observer of minute differences. No wonder he embraced the theory of the organization of the living of Maturana and Varela, in which the concept of the observer plays a key role. Combined with his precise and complex reasoning trained in legal science he further developed this theory and transferred it to sociology, where it became soon a cornerstone of his own monumental construction of theory.

Theory was his passion. But beyond being a great theorist, he was a great person. He had a lot of patience, towards his topics of study as well as towards his students and friends. Many friends and colleagues appreciated and enjoyed his sense of humor and his contagious smile. Scientific dispute and conflict he could keep separate from personal relations, as demonstrated brilliantly in the controversy with Habermas.

A considerable part of his life work consists in applying his abstract, complex frame of theoretical reference to virtually all areas of society, from the internal workings of administration to global ecological problems, from politics and economy to arts, love, and religion. Aiming at a universal theory of society no sector of society was

left out in his attempt to apply, test, and further develop his theory. He used his incredible encyclopedic knowledge, accumulated from the tremendous amount of reading he did.

Luhmann spent most of his life in the plains of Northern Germany, not on the coast, but at Lüneburg, Hannover, Münster, and Bielefeld, where the sea is beyond the horizon, sending the winds to sweep up the skies, blue and grey. Horizons, after all, become one of the key concepts in his theory. It seems they were a key concept in his life too, as again and again he moved towards new challenges.

Early Years

Niklas Luhmann was born on December 8, 1927, in Lüneburg, Germany, as the son of the owner of a brewery. His mother was of Swiss origin, and the family kept their distance from politics during those difficult times. In 1944 seventeen year old Niklas Luhmann had to join the German armed forces. This experience, along with a short time of being a prisoner of war, convinced him to turn to the study of law at Freiburg afterwards (1946-49). He felt this was a way of creating some order in the chaos of life he had experienced so far and to counteract the lawlessness he had seen. This kind of study made him familiar with the handling of legal-theoretical constructions and the analysis of results of different possible options, a theme he would take up later in sociology, just like he would profit later from his passion for reading, which he had developed already as a pre-school child, and from his interest in history.

The Practitioner of Law and Public Administration

Nevertheless, there was no straight line to becoming a famous professor of sociology. The material hardships of post-war Germany urged him to study rapidly and to return to Lüneburg. There, traineeship for becoming a lawyer showed him that this profession would imply only formal independence while in fact making him dependent on a variety of constraints. With his peculiar and often surprising logic, with which he later on would work out the issues of functional equivalence and differentiation, he decided to go into public administration. This promised more liberty to follow his own ideas.

First at the Court of Administration at Lüneburg (1954), then at the State Ministry of Culture and Education in Hannover he was doing practical work on legal affairs of public administration, without neglecting private intellectual interests. At that time his ideas were not yet very clearly focussed, although directed towards theoretical aspects of law and philosophy (1955-62). In this period he got married (1960) and soon had a family with three children. During this time, however, it became also clear that his curriculum and interests would not fit an ordinary administrative career, and that he was not willing to give up his independence by joining a political party in order to succeed. Although he liked his work, it gradually became routine. Aware of the difficulties of progressing in his career, Niklas

Luhmann gladly accepted the opportunity to take a sabbatical leave to go to Harvard for a year (1960-61). There he studied with Talcott Parsons and collected materials for a future publication.

Beginnings of a Scientific Career

Upon his return to Germany, another opportunity opened up for Niklas Luhmann to continue his scientific work without abandoning his status as a state government official. He managed to get transferred to a research institute at the School of Public Administration at Speyer (1962-65). There he enjoyed great independence in his work and could follow his own scientific interests. At Speyer he published his first book on "Functions and Consequences of Formal Organizations" (1964).

His career as a sociologist started in 1966, when Niklas Luhmann was at the age of 39 already. At that time Helmut Schelsky was involved in the foundation of a new "Reform University", which after all turned out to be at Bielefeld. He had convinced Niklas Luhmann to come to Dortmund to work with him in 1965. In 1966 Niklas Luhmann managed to get his Ph.D. as well as his Habilitation at the University of Münster, working with Helmut Schelsky and Dieter Claessens.

At Münster, Niklas Luhmann gave his inaugural lecture on "Sociological Enlightenment", setting up a program of sociological research inspired by the Age of Enlightenment and with high ambitions for sociology.

The Professor at Bielefeld

In 1968, Niklas Luhmann was the first professor formally appointed at the newly founded Reform University of Bielefeld. There, as a member of the Faculty of Sociology, he could finally devote his full energy to a theory of modern society. For Niklas Luhmann this was first to be a description of society. His efforts to develop such a description as a theory without a normative basis were primarily inspired by systems theory and cybernetics and to some extent by Husserl's phenomenology.

The basic rationale for this approach was that a description and analysis is required before any recipes can be given. A theory, in Luhmann's opinion, first of all should provide a better and more complex understanding of the world. One important attempt to investigate the range of his theoretical approach and to expand it in confrontation with another important theory was the so-called Habermas-Luhmann controversy (1971).

Methodology

Being trained in law, Niklas Luhmann developed precise and complicated argumentations, i.e. "techniques of theory". However, he did not do empirical work in the sense of research projects involving empirical data collection and statistical processing or participant observation in the ethnological style. Instead, he worked

empirically in terms of library research and case studies, corresponding to the style of legal science. Perhaps this conformed more closely to his topic than the collection of empirical raw data. After all, his topic was society as a whole and his passion was theory.

Student of Parsons and Researcher on Complexity

In a way, Niklas Luhmann, a student of Parsons at Harvard, can be considered a worthy successor to Talcott Parsons and the earlier classic figures in sociology. It was Parsons and after him Luhmann, who aimed at working out a universal encompassing sociological theory - grand theory!

In another way, he was not a follower of Parsons, although his whole work is based on functionalism. Niklas Luhmann very clearly perceived the problems in Parsons' approach and dynamized and generalized very radically the original structural-functional approach by a strategic shift of paradigm to problem-functionalism and by assigning a central theoretical place to the concept of functional equivalence. These were, in a way, "theory-technical" pre-conditions for giving a central place to complexity and making this highly abstract concept not only a "world formula", as some would say, but also making it highly productive for sociological analysis. Much of Luhmann's work can be considered an analysis of complexity under different conditions and in different sectors of society.

Complexity, however, leaned toward remaining an empty formula. In Luhmann's theoretical framework it becomes more tangible and obtains an increased capacity for guiding theory when it is combined with autopoiesis. To arrive at a general theory of society, Luhmann incorporated and adapted to his own work the theory of autopoietic systems, developed originally by Maturana and Varela for living systems. Considered as communication systems, social systems are non-living systems in Niklas Luhmann's view. With this, his theory of society is about as far from Maturana and Varela as from Parsons' "Structure of Social Action", AGIL system, and pattern variables.

This move in a way also leads to a thinning of sociology from action to mere communication, from a colorful multi-level system consisting of a number of emergent levels of reality, as described e.g. by Walter Buckley, to the apparently isolated level of pure communication. For this level, according to Luhmann, everything else, including human beings as persons and psychic systems, is "environment". A central category in this set-up of theory is not the actor anymore, but the observer.

The Observer

Luhmann insisted on being an observer. Not necessarily because he would object to action, but definitely because he objected to premature action. After all, observation is the first step. For this he had a predestination, being a specialist of law trained in

observing situations, fitting them to legal frameworks and regulations, and arguing with the tools provided by legal theory. This, along with his longstanding interest in history and his study of Husserl and phenomenology, sets him apart from the style of natural sciences, i.e. empirical measurement, data collection, and statistical hypothesis testing as a way to construct theory.

The Sociologist

Although there are reproaches that Luhmann was "too philosophical", close reading of his works, and especially his late work, shows that he was indeed a sociologist, usually, however, a very abstract one. He clearly pinpoints and takes into account philosophical problems. But more than anything else he was interested in their social basis and social consequences. In this way it is hardly justified to call him a philosopher. Instead, what he was doing intensively was a sociology of knowledge and in many instances even a sociology of philosophy.

Conclusion

Niklas Luhmann carried the analysis of social systems as communication systems to its last stage. What this means for sociology as a contemporary discipline is by no means clear yet. But where a genius has brought about a new paradigm, for the army of "regular scientists", in the sense of Thomas S. Kuhn, there remains a lot to be done.

His restriction to "observation" is clearly against the tides of the time. Yet if many of us, sociologists and systems scientists, think we cannot afford the luxury of non-intervention in our problem-ridden times, or if we are in fact under daily pressure in our jobs to "produce" both scientific results and students to the precise profiles requested by the economy and the "market", we should take a moment to consider whether such a great personality like Niklas Luhmann does not have a series of lessons to teach us. Complexity can be handled only by complexity, variety is required to allow answers to new surprises and problems. Time, temporalization, and different speeds in different societal subsystems are crucial elements of current life. The firm structures of our world are dissolving into processes and events enabling precarious autopoiesis. BUT: Reflection and learning comes only after the event, reaction to a set of problems produces effects only once the situation has changed already again.

Even those who may not fully share Niklas Luhmann's opinion that sociology should not try to improve the world, should take very seriously his insistence on careful observation and theory building, on ethics depending on theory (not determining it) and on the functional differentiation between science, including sociology, and politics.

Niklas Luhmann's death is an obligation for us to preserve his legacy and to continue in his interdisciplinary and inquiring spirit to explore the frontiers of

sociological systems science. His credo of "Sociological Enlightenment" certainly deserves to be adopted by all of us as a major orientation to our work.

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