

**XVI ISA World Congress of Sociology
Durban, South Africa, 23-29 July 2006**

**RC 51 Round Table Session 4: Luhmann Applied
Tuesday, 25 July 2006**

**Niklas Luhmann and Critical Theory:
Non-Critical System Theory vs. Critical Systemic Sociology?**

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1. Introduction

Critics of system-theoretical sociology have often claimed that this branch of sociology is predominantly conservative in nature, that is, that the mainstream of system-theoretical sociology would not be willing to criticize and change contemporary society in a fundamental way. A criticism like this was presented particularly strongly by leftist social theorists in the 1950s and 1960s, when Talcott Parsons and his structural-functional school dominated system-theoretical sociology.

As is well known, quite similar accusations have been directed at Niklas Luhmann, who was a disciple of Parsons. But is Luhmann really as non-critical as his opponents have thought? Does he, in this respect, differ crucially from Jürgen Habermas, Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens, who represent the spirit of leftist critical theory in contemporary systemic or system-theoretical sociology? Is the Habermasian statement of the early 1970s also true of Luhmann's late production? According to this well-known statement, Luhmann's thinking would appear to lack any critical questioning of contemporary economic and political power structures, with the result that his system-theoretical sociology would seem, Habermas continued, to be some kind of social engineering (Habermas 1976.)

I should like in this presentation to compare Luhmann's system-theoretical sociology with critical systemic sociology. On the one hand, my presentation looks at the general theoretical contrasts between Luhmann and critical systemic sociology, while on the other it pays attention to their conceptions of art. Because the general theoretical contrasts between them manifest themselves clearly within this specific area, that is, the area of art theory, it is useful to illustrate these general contrasts by means of their views of art. Art is a topic which Luhmann, Bourdieu and Habermas have written several investigatory studies, whereas Giddens has ignored it; hence, Giddens will play no central role here. Within these limits, I consider their investigations concerning art as applications of their general systemic sociologies. Conversely, I largely bypass specific art-theoretical problems that are not closely related to the general level of consideration.

2. The Main Contrasts between Luhmann and Critical Theory

A number of theorists have noticed that Luhmann and Jacques Derrida share certain basic traits. They are kindred souls in the sense that they attempted to re-appraise the tradition of Western thinking to a profound extent. In addition, each of them also regarded

himself as a representative of a new phase in Western thinking. (For a closer discussion, see, Sevänen 2001; 2006.)

Speaking more specifically, Derrida was critical of the tradition of Western metaphysics; as he himself said, he wanted to “deconstruct” its fundamental presuppositions and engagements. Luhmann, on the other hand, adopted an ironical-sceptical attitude toward “Old-European humanism”. In consequence, it is possible to define him as an anti-humanist.

Humanism can be understood as a value orientation or ideology whose picture of the world is anthropocentric: it considers the world from the point of view of human beings and groups and the whole of humanity. In traditional Western humanism, which originated in the Enlightenment period of the 17th and 18th centuries, an ability to think rationally and to act freely were seen as the essential properties of human beings. Enlightenment philosophers believed that a close relationship existed between reason and freedom: it is by means of their reason that human beings can free themselves from erroneous preconceptions and the dictates of external authority. Consequently, the proper use of reason should make individual autonomy and rational social order possible. No wonder, then, that humanism has often been closely connected with democratic values, political activism and a radical critique of society, since in practice active humanists have sought to abolish the economic, social and political obstacles that prevent people from leading a free, safe and worthwhile life.

In recent systemic sociology, the radical legacy of Enlightenment thinking has been maintained by Bourdieu, Giddens and Habermas. They do not, however, entirely approve of the humanist conception of human beings. Because classical European humanism regarded human beings as basically free creatures, it was inclined to emphasize the existence of an inherent antithesis between the individual and society. Bourdieu, Giddens and Habermas do not share this kind of asocial view of human nature. Rather, they understand individuals or actors largely as products of various historical, societal and cultural determinants.

Their systemic sociology is based on the concepts of actor and action, or they otherwise take into account the level of the social actors. Thus, to be more precise, they represent a tradition of actor-centric thinking rather than humanism’s anthropocentric thinking. Despite this, a truly anthropocentric dimension underlies the goals of their sociology. By means of this they have attempted to improve people’s capacity to act and reflect critically on the world and on themselves. (For further discussion, see Bourdieu 1990a and 1990b; Giddens 1979 and 1986; Habermas 1973 and 1981.)

Luhmann disapproved of Enlightenment thinking. His theory of autopoietic social systems is not based on anthropocentric premises; it contains scarcely any references at all to human actors. His anti-humanism can, for example, be seen in his basic concepts “society”, “functional sub-system” and “communication”.

In his early production Luhmann stuck to the view that entire human beings do not belong to social systems. Such systems are, he suggested, doubtless created and maintained by individuals, while, on the other hand, individuals constantly participate in them, but the complete “psychic and physical systems” of individuals, that is, their minds and bodies, are nevertheless situated outside those systems. In his early production Luhmann thought that such systems consist of meaningful action produced by people as “persons” or social actors.

In his late production Luhmann sharpened this view. Now he repeatedly stated that society and functional sub-systems do not consist of human beings, nor do they consist of human action. On the contrary, such systems consist of communications which they themselves produce and which, in turn, maintain them. In consequence, society and functional differentiated sub-systems are self-referential formations because they themselves produce the elements which they consist of or because they are able to self-regenerate. At the same time they are autopoietic formations, since the concept of autopoiesis refers to an entity’s ability to produce and reproduce itself.

In this manner Luhmann arrived at an anti-humanist view of social systems. As such, the concept of communication does not, of course, make his later views anti-humanist. It is the content of this concept that matters here. In order to be able to understand his thinking, one needs to be aware of the fact that his concept of communication does not have much in common with the common-sense meaning of the word “communication”. In Luhmann’s theory, it is not people who communicate, since, as he claimed, “only the communication can communicate”. By this he meant that we cannot equate communication with the acts and states of mind of entire and concrete people. The flow of communication is, no doubt, dependent on people, since it cannot exist without them, but it is incorrect to reduce this flow to their acts, intentions and states of mind. For Luhmann, communication is primarily a characteristic of social systems which maintain it by using certain psychic and physical capabilities of individuals. Thus, he de-subjectivised the concept of communication and emptied it of anthropocentric presuppositions. (Luhmann 1984b; 1997.)

One can also say that Luhmann belongs to the camp of the holists, since he thought that the properties of social systems could not be reduced to the properties of

individuals or actors. To be more precise, Luhmann can even be described as an extreme holist, since he held that social systems can be studied without pointing to the level of actors. Thus, in his applied or special studies of functional sub-systems he was interested in media, media-codes and operation principles of those systems. He wished to explicate how and with what kind of tools those systems functioned. In this process, he took into consideration, in particular, economics, science, law, art and the mass media.

Conversely, Luhmann largely ignored the social arrangements that maintain social systems. Hence, questions of power, equality and justice are missing from his theoretical horizon. In fact, Luhmann did not want to connect the idea of social criticism to his system-theoretical sociology. He endeavoured to impose limits on social criticism, on Enlightenment thinking, and ultimately on social movements that dreamt about the moral-practical perfection of society.

In contrast to Luhmann, the critical theorists mentioned previously represent moderate holism with actor-centric elements. In other words, they share the view that the properties of social systems or system-like social wholes cannot be deduced from the properties of individuals, but at the same time they state that, on the other hand, social systems are not independent of social actors: in reality, they are produced and maintained by social actors. In addition, the empirical research work dealing with social systems must use material that concerns the action of individuals and groups. Without this, it would, in practice, be almost impossible to undertake a study such as this.

3. Two Ways of Studying the System of Art

Even if Luhmann theorized about social systems without a theory of action, he could not entirely abandon the category of actor in his applied studies. In “Die Kunst der Gesellschaft” (1995) he uses this category, because he thinks that art is a special sort of communication: it communicates by using perceptions that concern the world, and in this way it makes perceptions available for communication and other people. Therefore Luhmann also holds that art is, as a social system, close to psychic systems.

It should be noticed that, actually, perceiving or observing is an activity that is performed by an actor or subject. More generally, Luhmann needs terms such as “the artist” and “the receiver of art works” in his theory of the system of art. What is important here is the fact that for him “the artist”, “the receiver” and “the observer” are abstract figures with no

specific social properties. He does not tell us the social class, sexual group, age group, ethnic group and regional area these actors belong to. As a result of this, he gives us a rather abstract scientific representation of the system of art. This representation seems to pass over the variety of any concrete social world.

Luhmann used an abstract language of this kind because he thought that entire human beings do not belong to social systems. Instead, he said, social systems simply utilize certain psychic and physical capabilities of actors.

Another reason for this kind of abstract language can be seen in Luhmann's view of differentiation. In his theory, the differentiation of functional sub-systems is manifested in the differentiation of the corresponding media. When society was differentiated into functional sub-systems, these sub-systems began to develop their own media and medium codes. Gradually, the media and the medium codes settled, and at the same time functional differentiation became society's main structural feature; this constellation guarantees the autopoiesis of functional sub-systems. Naturally, people use these media and medium codes when acting in sub-systems, but their action does not define the identity and boundaries of each sub-system. It is the media and medium codes that provide functional sub-systems with their identity and boundaries. Hence, Luhmann thought that it was justified to investigate functional sub-systems without paying close attention to their actors.

Originally, Luhmann connected the medium of Beauty and the medium code of Beautiful/Non-Beautiful with the system of art. He added that, in addition to the medium code of Beautiful/Non-Beautiful, codes such as original/traditional, innovative/conventional, new/old, believable/non-believable are relevant in the making and receiving of art works. Even at the beginning of the 1990s Luhmann supposed that in the system of art communication is based on codes such as these. (Luhmann 1984a; 1986; 1994.)

Later he understood the medium and the medium code of the system of art in a another way. However, despite this change in his thinking, he did not abandon his approach to the system of art. In addition, in his last works he focuses on considering how this system operates and what its principles of operation are. His approach to systems is phenomenological in the sense that he states the existence of their media, media codes and operation principles without explaining them (see Luhmann 1995).

From Bourdieu's perspective, aesthetic codes are regarded rather differently. Bourdieu considers such codes to be the attitudes and dispositions of their social actors. On the level of their consciousness and self-understanding, social actors – in this case, certain art

devotee groups – use aesthetic codes but, Bourdieu emphasized, sociology should not limit itself to the mere affirmation of this state of affairs; it should not limit itself to the phenomenology of aesthetic codes and attitudes. Rather, it should go beyond the individual actors' self-understanding and ask what consequences this kind of action has. (Bourdieu 1979; 1992. See also Bourdieu & Darbel 1969.)

According to Bourdieu's theory, higher social classes attempt to distinguish themselves from lower classes. For this purpose they develop complicated distinctions; they demand, for example, that art should be received by means of an aesthetic attitude and aesthetic codes. The lower classes are not particularly interested in art, and when they happen to deal with works of art their attitude is a mixture of various – moral, aesthetic, cognitive, practical – valuation principles or codes.

Bourdieu states that if we confine ourselves only to the consideration of the codes of the field of art, we fail to see that the dominating codes in this field correspond to the cultural interests, life style and habitus of the higher social classes. In other words, questions concerning cultural domination and cultural power relations remain outside the phenomenological analysis.

When presenting a comparison like this, I do not mean to imply that Luhmann's thinking is simply erroneous and that, conversely, Bourdieu is self-evidently right. In fact, I believe that Luhmann's view of the codes of the art system can be fruitful. My point is that his method of considering social systems is narrow and formal. He limits himself to description of the basic rules of the art system. Bourdieu has conceived of these basic rules in a way that is largely compatible with Luhmann's, but in addition to this he has attempted to explicate the kind of social arrangements that maintain the rules under question. It is true that Bourdieu's view of those arrangements can be questioned; they seem to be class-reductionist in a simplistic way. However, Bourdieu has at least attempted to investigate the field of art in relation to the rest of society. Hence, I tend to think that the Luhmannian way of considering the art system must somehow be supplemented with this kind of substantial or deep-sociological point of view.

4. What do these Sociologists Understand by “Criticism”?

Thus far we have seen how Luhmann excludes the concrete social world and its problems from his theoretical horizon. Despite this, his theory is not entirely devoid of critical elements and hence we are obliged to consider his idea of criticism and compare it with the idea of criticism presented by critical theorists.

Luhmann's idea of criticism has a predominantly philosophical-conceptual content, whereas in critical theory this idea is historical-societal in nature. The founding fathers of the Frankfurt School – figures such as Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse – considered modern industrial-capitalist society from a large historical perspective. Although they were critical of the economic and political power structures of this society, an observation that was more important – and even frightening – for them was that this society was increasingly dominated by “technical” or “instrumental reason”. Reason of this kind simply seemed to erase all kinds of substantial values from the public sphere of modern society. At the same time, the classics of the Frankfurt School paid attention to the manifestations of “false” or “ideological consciousness” that prevented people from acquiring an accurate picture of society, and so they also indulged in criticism of ideologies.

Habermas's (1981) theory of communicative action is a direct continuation of these views. The Habermasian “communicative rationality” represents substantial values, which the development of capitalist economics and the political power structures of modern society threaten to marginalise in the modern world. In consequence, Habermas has criticized the systems of economics and politics that, according to him, tend to destroy people's life worlds; that is, an area which communicative rationality is based on.

Luhmann (1997: 1117-1124) did not approve of this approach to criticizing society. According to him, the Frankfurt School has generally been critical at the level of first-order observations, although it has also criticized “distorted” lines of thought and ideologies. At the level of first-order observations, it has observed society by means of distinctions such as democratic/non-democratic and authentic/manipulated, and it has also labelled other descriptions of society as erroneous or ideological. In this sense, the Frankfurt School includes no notion of the contingent nature of sociological descriptions. Rather, it has simply adopted the position of a “Besserwisser” or an observer who permits no proper comparisons.

First-order observations are directed towards reality, but they cannot attain it as such. This impossibility derives, Luhmann continues, from the fact that our minds are autopoietic systems that handle sense perceptions according to their own principles of operation. Hence, we should not regard human knowledge as a mirror of reality but as a

construct. In his constructivist line of thought Luhmann then abandoned the correspondence notion of truth and discarded realistic epistemology. This epistemology is based on the notion that a theory may be accepted as true if there are enough reasons to suppose that it corresponds to reality. According to Luhmann, we cannot know what kind of entity reality is; we can only know how it reveals itself to us.

In Luhmann's thinking, the world as it reveals itself to us is contingent in nature. Our picture of this phenomenal world varies according to the kinds of positions and angles from which we consider it and also according to the kinds of distinctions and concepts that we apply to it or project into it. According to Luhmann, we must use tools such as these when constructing the phenomenal world, but, he continues, every now and then it is useful to "deconstruct" this world and to outline it using new tools. Hence, in our cognitive action we should emphasize the dialectics of constructing and deconstructing the world.

Luhmann's own thinking is critical at the levels of second-order and third-order observations. Second-order observations are directed towards observations that have been produced by the first-order. They adopt the first-order observations as the object of reflective reasoning. The third-order, in turn, consists of systematically developed theories that attempt to describe and explain the world. At the level of second-order observations, Luhmann wishes to analyse critically the distinctions and conceptual tools that sociologists apply at the level of first-order observations. And at the level of third-order observations he analyses critically different theories of society and social systems.

Thus, Luhmann discarded the realistic epistemological assumptions that underlie the thinking of the Frankfurt School. Bourdieu's method of practising sociology seems to rely on similar assumptions. In consequence, Luhmann thought that their way of criticizing society was untenable. An intellectually honest criticism is generally possible only at the levels of second-order and third-order observations.

5. The Function of Art

Luhmann argues that art has an important task, because it helps us to become aware of the contingent nature of the phenomenal world. Works of art help us to understand that everything that exists in this world could also exist in another way – or that this world could

always be constructed in several different ways. Works of art achieve this task in two ways: (a) by means of their form and composition, and (b) by means of their content.

Luhmann regarded a work of art as a wholeness of form that consists of details or components. While making his as yet unfinished work of art, the artist must repeatedly decide whether the details that he has intended to add to the work actually suit the work. Hence, neither the work of art as a wholeness of form nor its details are based on the principle of necessity. Both the completed work and its details are the result of choices made by the artist. The artists' freedom of choice is not, however, unlimited, because the details should not be totally arbitrary. In a successful work the parts are motivated in the sense that they suit the rest of the work. At the same time, a work like this mediates to its receivers an awareness of its own contingent nature; that is, when receiving the work, the receivers realize that at least some of its details could have been chosen or made in another way.

Luhmann says that the "emancipation of contingency" that is implicitly included in the composition of works of art does not, as such, represent any critical attitude towards society, nor does it give works of art a political function. The principle of contingency is indifferent with regard to the distinction Critical vs. Affirmative attitude towards society. Instead, it provides its receivers with a pluralist, relativist and historicist world view – that is, with the thought that products of human action are replaceable constructs. Because all of these three dimensions are also characteristic of modern thinking, Luhmann holds that works of art can be regarded as paradigmatic examples of modernity.

In art, the "emancipation of contingency" is also related to the content of works of art – or to the fictional nature of works of art. For Luhmann, fictionality, or imaginativity, self-evidently belongs to the constitutive features of art. He suggests that a work of art establishes its own universe or its own fictional world, which differs from the ordinary phenomenal world. As a result of this difference, the receivers of art can compare the level of the ordinary phenomenal world with another ontological level, that is, with the fictional world of the work of art. Fictionality arouses in its receivers an awareness of the contingent nature of the ordinary phenomenal world. Fictional works of art implicitly tell us that this world is not the only possible world; worlds of other kinds are possible, as well.

In addition to a philosophical awareness of this kind, fictional worlds of art may contain an explicit or implicit criticism of society. A work of art can convey a critical relation to society, but other kinds of relations are also possible. For example, a work of art may have a purely imitative relation to society. In this case it simply attempts to present a plausible picture

of social life. On the other hand, when a work of art attempts to provide its receivers with pleasure, its relation to society usually remains affirmative or uncritical.

Thus, the elements of social criticism are not central in Luhmann's theory of art. He thinks that it is due to their fictionality that works of art are able to criticize the shortcomings of society, but this possibility is not realised in every work of art. Hence, he continues, social criticism is not a constitutive feature in art. For him, art's function consists of its ability to arouse and maintain in us an awareness of the contingent nature of our phenomenal world. (Luhmann 1995. See also Luhmann, Bunsen & Baecker 1990.)

In contrast to this, the Frankfurt School has understood art as an implicit or explicit criticism of the "formal" or "instrumental rationality" prevalent in modern industrial-capitalist society. Habermas (1973; 1982) writes that from the 18th century onwards Western art has harboured needs that could not be realised in the practical life processes of modern society. Included in these needs have been a desire for personal happiness, free spiritual development, solidarity in social interaction, and a respect for truth, justice and human dignity. Thus, for Habermas, modern Western art has been a source of substantial or communicative rationality, and it is in this sense that it has co-existed in a tense relationship with industrial capitalist society – or with the modern systems of economics and politics.

Presented in a direct manner, we have here two different ways of interpreting works of art. Luhmann sees works of art as alternative ways of constructing the world but not typically as social criticism, whereas the critical tradition regards them as an explicit or implicit criticism of modern societal rationality. Which of these ways is the right one? Perhaps it is not possible to answer this question in a simple way. To a certain extent, these two approaches are based on the properties of works of art, but they also represent two different types of interest in knowledge connected with art. Because the representatives of critical theory place so much stress on societal emancipation, they tend to find elements of social criticism in works where Luhmann mainly detects worlds that deviate from the ordinary phenomenal world and show us the contingency of this world. Thus, at least in part, their differing interest in knowledge directs them to see works of art in different ways.

6. Conclusion

In his production, Luhmann does not practise criticism in the same sense as critical theorists have practised it. Critical theorists have assumed that an adequate knowledge of societal reality is possible, and societal criticism therefore has a secure and truthful epistemological basis. Luhmann, on the other hand, thought that this kind of basis is not possible. Sociology should, therefore, only criticize the distinctions, concepts and theories by means of which the societal reality is observed or constructed. A criticism of this kind is conceptual-philosophical in nature.

Critical theorists have also seen art as an important source of societal criticism. Luhmann did not understand art in this way, even if he admitted that some works of art may contain societal criticism. Luhmann saw art from a constructionist point of view. From this perspective, art tells us that the phenomenal world is a human construction and as such it can always, in principle, be replaced with constructions that are different from the prevailing ones

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Sevänen, Erkki 2006: "A Long-Term Contrast in Systemic Sociology. A Comparative Analysis of Niklas Luhmann's Anti-Humanist System Theory and Actor-Centric Critical Theory - Their Different Views of Art as an Example of the General Contrast Existing Between Them". *Cybernetics and Human Knowing* 13:2. (Forthcoming).