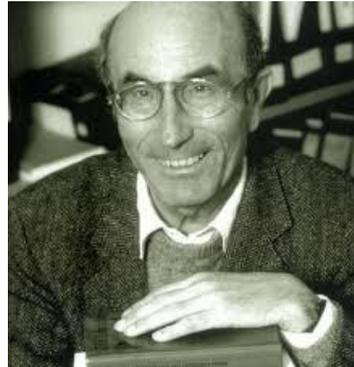


On the Radicalism
of Niklas Luhmann's (1927-1998)
Theory of Society



A Self-Professed Radical

- In his major work *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (engl. transl.: *Theory of Society*, p. 24) Luhmann describes his view of society as
 - radically anti-regionalist
 - radically anti-humanist
 - radically constructivist

Least Controversial: Anti-Regionalism

Different from most traditional social theories, “common sense”, and “old-European” ideas, Luhmann thinks:

Society cannot be understood as divided into geographical or cultural regions or groups (e.g. Italian society vs. French society) but must be understood in terms of different function or communication systems (e.g. the economy, politics, etc.) which operate *globally*.

Social systems theory explains **World Society**.

Most Controversial: Anti-Humanism

- Society cannot be defined and understood in terms of a sum of individual people or agents (“anti-humanist”) —but must be understood in terms of communication.

Anti-Humanism: An Example

The meaning and function of this very event cannot be explained by analysing our individual thoughts and bodies, but must be understood in terms of how and what we communicate. The social framework of this event (book launch, conference) must be understood, not the biology or psychology of the people in the room.

Body-Mind-Communication Triad

- Bodies (living systems) and minds (mental systems) are in the environment of society, but not inside.
- Life and thought are external conditions of communication/society but are not immediate parts of it.
- Social “things” (e.g. legal laws, scientific truths, economical value) do not result from or express human thoughts/ideas/intentions. Rather, the economy, the education system, politics emerge and evolve, like our bodies, without being planned or steered by us or by “intelligent design” (God).

A Radical Theory of Social Evolution

- Just as in biological evolution, where biological systems evolve/emerge through the process of biological evolution—and thus randomly, contingently, or as an unlikely result given the innumerable alternative possibilities if evolution would have taken another turn—society/communication (e.g our laws, politics, science) evolves autopoietically or self-generating, and not through human or divine planning or control.

The Sociological Insult

The three insults of human vanity according to Freud:

- 1) The cosmological insult (Copernicus): The earth is not at the center of the cosmos.
- 2) The biological insult (Darwin): Humans are not the crown of creation.
- 3) The psychological insult (Freud): The *ego* is not in control of our mind (unconscious desires, internalized social expectations).

The fourth one by Luhmann:

- 4) The sociological insult (Luhmann): Society is not a result of human planning and intentionality.

Most Philosophically Challenging: Radical Constructivism

- Whatever is real, is real as an effect of being constructed as real by an observer

Immanuel Kant: Time and Space: forms of intuition: not attributes of “things in themselves,” but basic structures of the human capacity to “intuit”, perceive, and understand the world.

Time and space are cognitive forms, forms of observation without which we cannot observe (very simple living organisms may still be able to perceive a world but may not have a “sense” of time or space)

“Social Constructs” I

- All real social structures become real as an effect of social reality construction/observation:

(economic) value—is not based on “use-value” or “material value”, but on being observed as valuable (“location, location, location” for real estate value, fashion value for clothes items)

(political) power—is not based on actual qualities of those who have power or on their inherent legitimacy but on how a position of power is perceived in society

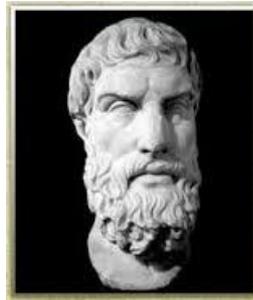
(scientific) truth—is constructed on the basis of the truth-construction rules in the science system (publication in prestigious outlets, positions at prestigious institutions)

“Social Constructs” II

- (religious) holiness—is constructed on the basis of religious communication in society, not on the basis of the holy nature of divine beings or human saints.
- gender (Luhmann does not talk about it much)—is not a direct effect of one’s biological essence, but an effect of how sex is socially “observed” and institutionalized (gender roles, etc.)
- fame—celebrity status is not achieved because of essential qualities of the celebrities, but as a result of specific forms of mass media communication which construct fame

This All is (not so) New and Radical

- Luhmann is a (not so) hidden Stoic.
- Epictetus (55-135 CE), *Enchiridion* 5: “People are not moved by things, but the views which they take of them.” (liberal translation)



Luhmann, the Stoic

- Luhmann advocates a “kind of Stoic attitude” (“The World Society as a Social System”) and quotes the Roman saying: *Nec spe nec metu*— (Neither hope nor fear!)

Luhmann's Stoicism

- Our state of mind, is, to an extent, an effect of our observation/construction of our (social) reality. While we cannot steer society (no hope!), we are free to reflect on it (including our own communication) and see it as mere construction (no fear!) that does not determine us and our thinking.

“Deconstruction” and “Liberation”

“Deconstruction” and “liberation” (NOT Luhmann’s terms) of society through an understanding of how social reality is constructed through contingent types of observation.

We can see through many social “things” (including our own social persona) as an effect of the power of social construction through observation, or as:

The Emperor's New Clothes (Or: 2nd-Order-Observation)



A Hidden Buddhist Radical

Linji 临济 (Rinzai), 9th century Zen (Chan) Chinese Buddhist:
“If you meet a Buddha, kill the Buddha. If you meet a patriarch, kill the patriarch (...) If you meet your parents, kill your parents. If you meet your kinfolk, kill your kinfolk. Then for the first time will you gain emancipation, will not be entangled with things, will pass freely anywhere you wish to go.” (Burton Watson, *The Zen-Teachings of Master Linji*, p. 52)



Theory

- Of course, all this radical talk of killing and freedom is only meant ***theoretically***.
- Thank You!