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Action and Communication in Niklas Luhmann's Social Theory

'Everyone knows, of course, that the word "human being" is not a human being. We must also learn that there is nothing in the unity of an object that corresponds to the word. Words such as "human being," "soul," "person," "subject," and "individual" are nothing more than what they effect in communication'

(LUHMANN 2002; 183)

Abstract. *This article offers a critical introduction to some of the most striking features of Niklas Luhmann's social theory. It opens with a discussion of Luhmann's departure from older forms of functionalism (above all the ideas of Parsons), and of how his work marks a distinct break with essentialism, foundationalism and humanism. This is followed by an account of the importance to his theory of free-form social structures that can reproduce themselves in ways not determined by external forces, a never-ending process in which, on Luhmann's account, human agents have no part to play. Next the place and role of communication (and of obstacles to communicative efficacy) in his vision of society are examined, and the decisive split between human action and communication systems in his work is further discussed. Finally, some of the implications of Luhmann's theory for social critique are drawn out, and it is argued that, despite posing serious difficulties for the idea of criticism as conventionally conceived, this theory might actually help to renew it.*

Keywords: *communications theory, cybernetics, human action, post-humanism, social change, social criticism, social systems, social theory.*

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: *komunikacijos teorija, kibernetika, socialinis veiksmai, post-humanizmas, socialiniai pokyčiai, socialinė kritika, socialinės sistemos, socialinė teorija.*

Luhmann's Post-Humanism

For Niklas Luhmann there is no link between human subjects and their social environment, to the extent that the human is in no way part of the social. Instead, there is in his work a profound shift away from the question of whether the two can in any way be identified

to a close examination of social systems and their operation. Moreover, while thinkers such as Simmel, Weber and many others in different ways lament the human cost of the growth of these systems, there is no such sense of loss in Luhmann. For him human subjects are divorced from all considerations of the social to the

point that, as King and Thornhill note: 'Society constructed around social systems is not in any way a *human* condition, and it is not causally produced out of human interaction or human directives' (2005; 172, italics in original). In part, Luhmann's position may have been affected by the work of Parsons where much stress is placed on the application of cybernetics, dominated by impersonal mechanisms, to social theory. The influence of Parsons on Luhmann (a student of Parsons in the early sixties) has often been noted (see for example Thornhill 2000; 175). However, while on one level Luhmann is the heir of previous functionalist thinkers, and especially Parsons, on another he sets out what amounts to a radically new theory.

It could be said that Luhmann rejects the pursuit of a normative science at the core of the Parsonian enterprise while at the same time giving it greater explanatory power, a crucial point of dispute being that the general notion of a social system in Parsons is founded on an essentialist view of human action. For Luhmann, this is to impose pre-emptive limits on what Parsons otherwise comes close to achieving through his thinking about how a system has its own medium for representing the world, or its own criterion of value for the inclusion and exclusion of information: a conception of systems as internally reinforcing free-form structures totally independent of each other, ones that simply facilitate communication and which require no conscious approval or disapproval in order to function successfully. In Parsons's terms, the construction of a complex network of convention guiding action towards predictable outcomes from which the individual

cannot easily deviate can only succeed in its task because it is a response to the supposedly fixed mental and physical needs of people. In other words, if systems actually succeed in managing and organising social behaviour, this is because they can finally still be read as expressions of fixed human characteristics. Here the need for order and constancy is an essential aspect of what it is to be human and it is expressed in the various functions of systems (pattern-maintenance, goal-attainment, adaptation and integration): it is defined as an essential part of both the system and the person. A general link between the needs of people and the technical imperatives of the system is established, and for Luhmann this detracts from the appeal of Parsons's work: 'Parsons stayed with a classical subject/object structure of scientific research' (Sciulli 1994; 39).

On this view, even Parsons's strongly anti-humanist attitude, indicated by references to a society in which individual actions are fundamentally inconsequential, becomes an exercise in humanism. Such an attitude is still dependent on the laying down of norms delineating the human, and similarly uses a pre-determined schema for describing society. From Luhmann's point of view, Parsons becomes a supporter of essentialism and can no longer be seen as a model; he is open to Luhmann's attack on humanistic thinking where the persistent concerns of various intellectuals with Enlightenment paradigms of the 'essence (the nature) of the human being' prevents them from grasping the 'social as such' (Luhmann 2000; 12; cited and discussed in King and Thornhill 2005; 132), unless it has been derived from and is expressive

of qualities that refer to the essential self. Given these differences, attempts to construct a lineage from Parsons to Luhmann by referring to the influence of the former on the latter do some damage to both figures, since much of Parsons's work (1966; 1977; 1978) can be seen as exemplifying just what Luhmann has abandoned. As we shall see, Parsons's anti-individualistic concepts are shared by Luhmann, but where Parsons's work is founded on a version of the belief that 'the universe is organized in accordance with some underlying plan, some regulatory structure, or some original founding principles' (King and Thornhill 2005; 136), Luhmann's concerns with a spontaneous, self-fulfilling social order and the critique of essentialist discourse might be more properly characterised as 'post-human'.

For Luhmann:

Unlike the Old-European theory of society, we do not begin with normative presuppositions. Nor, like Durkheim or Parsons, do we view the concept of norms as the ultimate explanation of the facticity or possibility of social order pure and simple. We do not even set sociological theory the task of formulating its own task with regard to societal norms or values. Past efforts – even recent past efforts – in this direction have been too discouraging to warrant repetition (Luhmann 1995; 325).

We have already seen that in Parsons social order is predicated on just such a set of norms that are themselves derived from a generalised, universal vision of the fixed characteristics of the human subject. In contrast, Luhmann suggests that there can no longer be any such recourse to a single perspective of truth. With the fragmentation of society into a multiplicity of differentiated systems co-existing with one another, there is no longer anything unified enough to

justify such a single description, nor is there an objective reference point from which to capture the diversity of social forms in a single image (see for instance Luhmann 1998; 18). This has damaging implications for the concept of the scientific observer as conventionally understood, and at the same time undermines a tradition stretching back to antiquity (and particularly to Aristotle) where, as Luhmann puts it, 'the whole had to be understood in a double sense: as the unity and as the totality of its parts. One could then say that the whole *is* the totality of its parts or is *more* than the mere sum of its parts' (1995; 5, italics in original). This attitude, associated with 'normative as well as classical functionalist reasoning' (Luhmann 1982; 241), is opposed by Luhmann, who argues that the observer's viewpoint, which is itself only a part of the society that has produced it, can never take a sufficient distance to arrive at an objective vision of the whole. It is rather that, 'each subsystem reconstructs and, in a sense, *is* the whole system in the special form of a difference between the subsystem and its environment' (1982; 231, italics in original). On this view, the whole can only be seen within the constraints imposed by one viewpoint; it becomes essentially multiple (1995; 208) and can even be read as 'less than the sum of its parts' (1982; 238). Here the world's complexity and unreliability become the most fundamental fact about it, to the extent that it is pointless to look for a set of rules that could accurately predict its behaviour.

For Luhmann, as King and Thornhill point out: 'social events are seen as the outcome not of definite causes but of *contingent conditions*, and the art (or science) of identifying causes and

providing and promoting “true” explanations is itself part of society and not external to it, and is as much subject to contingent conditions as anything else’ (2005; 3, italics in original). But the mere awareness of this fact does not lead Luhmann to abandon any attempt to represent the world and to understand its complexities. Nor does it oblige him to agree with postmodern theorising on, for instance, Lyotard’s terms (see Lyotard 1984). Indeed for Luhmann, the postmodern claim that there are no valid universal truths has yielded little more than particularist and anti-theoretical views, rooted in a preoccupation with the phenomenon of complexity itself (see for example Knodt 1994; 94-5). In fact, Luhmann suggests, that there is a postmodern discourse at all is not mere coincidence but is rather symptomatic of ‘a belated reaction, on the part of modernity, to the shock of its own contingency’ (Knodt in Luhmann 1995; x; see also Luhmann 1996; 1-19).¹ On this view, the idea that causal explanation is no longer universal should not lead one simply to celebrate pluralism: rather, ‘the end of metanarratives does not mean the end of theory, but a challenge to theory’ (Knodt in Luhmann 1995; xi). Luhmann directly addresses this issue, and creates a universal account of social reality in all its complexity and diversity but, unlike that of Parsons, one which does not look on it from the outside or in too idealist a fashion. Indeed, Luhmann says in relation to Parsons that: ‘Par-

sons, after all, found no place for himself in any of the more tiny boxes of his system. Because it excludes its author (and its reader?), his theory can claim to be general but not universal. [...] I think of systems theory as one of its own objects’ (Sciulli 1994; 39; see also Luhmann 1995; xlvii-xlviii). If we accept that ‘any communication about society can only take place within society’, then there is no room for ‘reflection on society external to society, where society can be regarded as an object’ (Stehr and Bechmann 2006; xxii). In this situation, the observer has to offer, not conceptual prescriptions, but rather ‘a complete theory of society that also includes reflection on its own location in society, and regards society in this sense as a unity capable of self-modification’ (ibid.). As we shall see, such a description of ‘society in society’ can no longer be based on any conception of the subject as a ‘hypothetical, free-floating intelligence’ that is not ‘subject to any distortion of perception due to interests or ideologies’ (ibid.). Thus it would have to deny, for instance, any transcendent aspect to rationality.

In Luhmann’s work, complexity is seen as the era’s defining feature, as a register of the powerlessness of classical models of thought, certainly, but also a spur to a new type of vision:

At the end of this century we find ourselves facing new kinds of tasks. The society that we observe today is no longer that of Marx, Weber or Durkheim. And even more so, it is not that

¹ For Luhmann, such considerations ‘pull the rug out from under the contrast of modern and postmodern’ for ‘if we understand “postmodern” to mean the lack of a unified cosmography, a universally applicable rationality, or even just a collective attitude toward the world and society, then this results from the structural conditions to which contemporary society delivers itself’ (Luhmann 1998; 17, 18).

of the Enlightenment or the French Revolution. More than ever before, the past has lost its binding force and this is also true in regard to the value criteria which once formed the basis for the search for rationality. And perhaps for these reasons knowledge about the future is more riddled with uncertainty than in any previous period. In this situation we can change almost nothing with those instruments specific to science: explanation and prognosis. It must be possible, however, to describe adequately what we find ourselves facing (Luhmann in King and Schütz 1994; 261-2).

Just because Luhmann flouts traditional notions of causality and probability and gives no weight to normative science, in contrast to the stance of, say, Parsons, and indeed of Kant,² this does not mean that for him there is no way to describe social life, or that for him it exhibits no meaning or pattern; it is just that Luhmann identifies the need to proceed without assumptions as a necessary response to the present situation:

This sceptical abstinence vis-à-vis norm-centered theory does not, of course, imply that one can imagine a possible societal life without norms. Binding oneself to norms or values is a pervasive aspect of social life. It does not, however, come about because human beings value living in a social order and honor this, through a kind of conceptual consensus. No such “social contract” exists, because the situation presupposed by the argument does not exist (Luhmann 1995; 325-6).

On this view, the theoretical study of society does not have to involve foundations, all events

have a chance structure, and when qualities of order emerge from inconceivable complexity this is against great odds. For Frédéric Vandenberghe (1999), Luhmann’s work is at base founded on a wonder at the highly improbable event of a semblance of order emerging from impossible complexity (p. 55). In an infinitely complex world founded only on contingency all things could in principle easily appear different. If there is an emergence of social order, albeit one of a contingent type, then this is not of course due to chance alone, as we shall see, but then neither can it be put down to the conscious or unconscious motivations of people.

As already noted, Luhmann completely rejects the idea that society as such is in any way made up of people and objects: ‘It cannot be conceived as a finite and bounded set of things and events (in the classical sense of a *universitas rerum* or *aggregatio corporum*)’ (Luhmann 1982; 232). Rather, ‘society is composed merely of communications’, while the ‘highly complex arrangement of individual macromolecules, individual cells, individual nervous systems, and individual psychic systems belongs to its environment – together with all the interdependencies among these systems on whatever levels’ (Luhmann 1995; 182). In this view, ‘Society does not have the character of a subject [...]. It is not an address for human appeals for action, and certainly not a venue for claiming equality and justice in the name of an autonomous

² Luhmann frequently criticises Kant, recounting for instance how: ‘Since Kant we know that the condition of the possibility of experience cannot be based in experience. But whereas Kant thought of transcendental conditions as the foundation of cognition we have to admit that conditions have lost their founding power’ (Luhmann 1996; 10). For an analysis of the ambivalent attitude of Luhmann to Kant, see King and Thornhill (2005; 137-9, 144).

subject' (Stehr and Bechmann 2006; xv).³ In fact, Luhmann suggests, the central paradigm in modern society is not at all that between the individual and the social, but rather that of systems and their environment. He writes that, "The central paradigm of recent systems theory is "system and environment" (1995; 176): 'subjectness, the availability of consciousness, its underlying everything else, is assumed to be the *environment* of social systems, not their *self-reference*' (ibid.; 170, italics in original). This banishment of people to a literally peripheral position completes the decentering of the subject that was begun in Luhmann's critique of the scientific observer: as Vandenberghe succinctly puts it, 'at this fateful point, systems theory takes an anti-humanist turn' (1999; 55).

Some of the most commonly made criticisms of Luhmann are made on this issue of his attack on humanism. For example, Robert Holub, in his essay 'Luhmann's Progeny', criticises the idea that 'The subject, the human agent, and consciousness' are not 'primary entities for sociology', and claims further that it is no accident that Luhmann's ideas have been largely accepted by German commentators, among whom the retreat from Leftist thinking continues (1994; 158, 159).⁴ Yet Luhmann's move towards anti-humanism is ambiguous, since it may be con-

ceived less as an overt political statement than as a logical consequence of a theory that tries to break with metaphysical speculations about the priority of human action over social organisation, and that in doing so might just open the way for a more effective understanding of how such order is created and recreated. Luhmann himself writes that 'the statement that persons belong to the environment of systems does not contain an evaluation of the significance of persons for themselves or for others. It only revises the overestimation implicit in the concept of the subject, namely, the thesis that consciousness is the subject of everything else' (1995; 177-8). Even if Luhmann's own statements about his work are not to be taken at face value, another problem for Holub and others who try to show that Luhmann has abandoned humanism as part of his political conservatism is whether such statements are only associated with right-wing views and whether they could also be useful to left-wing opinion. First, as King and Thornhill have shown, Luhmann's anti-humanist stand is highly unsuited to right-wing views, at least as classically conceived, of 'the role of the state, of pluralism, of social unity and of political values' (2005; 217-8), all of which are founded on a notion of the essential collective. Second, Luhmann's attack on classical humanism needs little

³ Luhmann's basic assumption is that, 'One can no longer capture the multiplicity and variety of specifically human behaviour by distinguishing the thing "human being" by means of special qualities such as reason, freedom of the will, sensibility, or even the empty formula of internal indeterminacy. This prevents one from saying that society is composed of human beings, that it is an ordered collection of human beings, a group, a people' (Luhmann 1995; 314).

⁴ For Holub, Luhmann's work can be reclaimed for the struggle against power relations by becoming 'less absolute and dogmatic in its theory' and 'more innovative and flexible in its practice' (1994; 159). For an analysis of Luhmann's ideas in relation to the turn to the Right (*Tendenzwende*) in German politics since the 1970s, see Thornhill (2000; 174-207).

modification to transform it to a judgement from the Left: we only need to think of the work of Althusser to see that the notion of human consciousness as an epiphenomenon may be a part of left-wing thinking (see Althusser 1969; 219-47).⁵ In highlighting these cross-currents the point is not to forge conceptual links between conventionally opposed views but rather to say that Luhmann's anti-humanist elements are not particular to a faction of political activity, and alone cannot be used to justify a refutation of his thought, nor indeed should they prevent a closer examination of its connotations.

Communication, Mind and Society

The importance of communication for Luhmann should now be considered. We have seen that for him what is social consists of communication and nothing more. Society, he writes, 'consists of meaningful communications – only of communications and of all communications'

(Luhmann in King and Thornhill 2005; 12). In line with Luhmann's arguments about the place of the individual in relation to the social, what follows is that it is not possible for the individual mind to communicate. He writes that the 'mind cannot consciously communicate. It can imagine that it is communicating, but this remains an imagination of its own system, an internal operation that allows the continuation of its own thought process. This is not communication' (Luhmann 2002; 170).⁶ For Luhmann, this is not to claim that consciousness is somehow a passive system: 'a system of consciousness can be active even without communication. It experiences this and that within itself, observes something, feels itself thinking, and even talks to itself' (p. 171).⁷ Nevertheless, consciousness is not a suitable medium for communication simply because the ideas and feelings of the 'psychic system' cannot be observed – indeed it remains 'invisible to communication' (p. 175).⁸

⁵ A similar point is made in King and Thornhill (2005; 217). Indeed for King and Thornhill, we can go further in making general associations between Luhmann's repudiation of humanism and certain features of the work of Marx: 'Luhmann shares with Marx the belief that human agency cannot simply be extrapolated from the complex systemic reality of modern society, and that it is clearly naïve to impute a substructure of human interest or human need as the integral origin of systems or institutions. For this reason, his work offers especially useful support to the anti-humanist arguments running through more systemic versions of dialectical materialism' (ibid.; 249f; see also Thornhill 2000; 204-5), where the same point is made but with the emphasis laid on the implications for the regulatory powers of the state.

⁶ Or alternatively: 'Humans cannot communicate; not even their brains can communicate; not even their conscious minds can communicate. Only communication can communicate' (Luhmann 2002; 169).

⁷ On the other hand, for Luhmann there is nothing so unique about consciousness as a self-regulating system of symbol-associations: '*cognition* must be understood as a recursive processing of symbols (however they are materialized) in systems isolated by the conditions of the connectability of their own operations (be they machines, in the sense of artificial intelligence; cells; brains; consciously operating systems; or communication systems)' (Luhmann 2002; 170, italics in original).

⁸ He writes further that: 'One does not need to know what is going on "inside" the subject (and of course, could never know this) and also does not need to know the "essence" of things (which is of itself infinite): the filling necessary for the continuation of communication suffices' (Luhmann 2002; 150).

The products of psychic activity become communicable only when they are given an apprehensible form, in for instance words, images and sounds (see for instance Luhmann 2000b; 86).⁹ Only then can they be meaningful for one or more functional systems in society, for both the systems of art and the mass media, for example, each of which might relate this information to their own internal workings. What is important here is a difference in medium between the mind and the systems of society with regard to meaning: for Luhmann, 'psychic and social systems are distinguished according to whether consciousness or communication is chosen as the form of operation. Meaning can insert itself into a sequence that is bound to bodily feelings; then it appears as consciousness. But meaning can also insert itself into a sequence that involves others' understanding; then it appears as communication' (1995; 98). There is in Luhmann's work then a sharply drawn distinction between the social and the mental, in the sense that the mind cannot be reconciled with communication.¹⁰ The two are merely 'structurally coupled', in that each 'constructs the other within its environment and their operations assume the existence of the other' (King and Thornhill 2005; 12). Luhmann in explaining the concept of structural coupling writes that its most important feature is that 'it does not indicate a causal relation and certainly not an instrumental relation, but one of

simultaneity', and 'simultaneity always means noncontrollability' (2006; 98; see also Luhmann in Rasch 2000; 208).

In relation to mind and society, some of the implications of a difference in medium are immediately apparent in the disjunction between the products of intention and their reception, something that occurs whenever mental material is moved from the mind to a wider world of sense. As Luhmann points out, the 'communicating parties *mean* this; they have this "in mind". But the media of communication themselves *are not to be confused* with the circumstances in question; rather, they are communicative instructions which can be manipulated more or less independently of whether such circumstances indeed exist or not' (1998; 19, emphasis in original). We should note how what is meant by 'manipulated' here is just that 'the selection of the action is placed within the system, is steered by the system's own rules, and is answerable in ways that it would not be if it were an action of the environment' (1995; 180). To argue otherwise, for Luhmann, would be to re-establish false causal relations between mind and society, to fall back upon the idea that 'humans can communicate or even that the individual can communicate with society' (2002; 182.).¹¹ His own view of what is social is rather of an aimless and ceaseless communicative mechanism:

Society is purposeless and must be treated in communication as untreatable through commu-

⁹ There are of course many other kinds of communication (gestures, for example). For a list of some of them see Luhmann (2000a; 18-9).

¹⁰ For instance, 'psychic and social systems cannot be reduced to each other. They use different media of reproduction: consciousness and communication' (Luhmann 1995; 271).

¹¹ See also Luhmann (2000), where he writes that 'communication about motives must accept the fact that it cannot really discover and verify the causalities implied. [...What] is meant by "mo-

nication. [...] Reproduction either does or does not take place. Communication either is or is not continued. Whenever it does continue, it remains adapted, no matter how self-dynamically it proceeds. It is not the goal of communication to adapt itself to the respective mind. [...] Communication has no goal (ibid.; 172, 161).

So there is no reason to think that because information about the events of a person's psychic life is filtered through a system in society it will serve to express mental qualities, or that now we can grasp the real significance of the material (see Luhmann 2000b; 114), for to do so would be to bridge the gap between private and public meanings, it would be to control the context in which meaning is created. For Luhmann, 'the mind and communication, psychic systems and social systems, never fuse or even partially overlap', but are closed off from one another to the point that they can 'actualize and specify only their own structures and thus can change only themselves' (2002; 176, 177). The implication is that 'inner experience must be regarded not as a fact but as the selective process of another system relating itself to its own environment (whereby relations cannot be observed, but only conceptualized)' (1998; 23-4). When for instance a printed book is placed in the public realm, there is no necessary connection between its private and public readings (see for instance Luhmann 1982; 248). It becomes rather a pretext for further possible interpretations. In Luhmann's terms, 'If communication appears as an utterance, it is, at that moment,

the same for all participants, indeed *the same at the same time*. [...] In this moment *everyone* deals with the *same* object, and this leads to a multiplication of connective possibilities for the next moment' (1995; 167, 167-8, emphasis in original). Even where there is general agreement on the meaning of the material, this is a product not of a communion between individuals but of the inner workings of their minds taken separately: there is 'no conscious link between one mind and another. There is no operational unity of more than one mind as a system, and whatever appears as a "consensus" is the construct of an observer, that is, his own achievement' (2002; 170). In all of this, it becomes clearer that the communications networks of society are not really there to address 'human' ends, and that their function 'can thus not be adequately comprehended at the level of factually localized qualities, feelings and causalities', since these are 'always already socially mediated' (1998; 19). Their precise function should now be examined in more detail, but a fundamental split between individual expression and social reality is already clearly apparent.¹²

A different conception of function (contrary to previously established ideas) is established in Luhmann where it is tied exclusively to communication. More specifically, the continuing function of systems in society is tied to their ability to reduce a chaotic environment based on infinite complexity to a form of communication based on emergent order

tive" is not causal factors operating on a psychic or even neurophysiological level, but rather that it is exclusively a matter of communicative representations, in other words, of how attribution to individuals is dealt with in communication' (p. 71).

¹² See the discussion of expression by signs in Luhmann (1995; 145-7).

(see for instance Luhmann 1982; 231). To do this is simply to replicate their conditions of possibility through time (1995; 23). Such systems do not, as in Parsons, work together to achieve social harmony, nor does the dysfunction of any system lead to breakdown. The fulfilment of function, for Luhmann, is not a prerequisite for 'the "survival" of society', nor is it an equivalent to 'adequate performance in intersystem relations' (1982; 245, 238). In his view, even structural problems involving the whole environment produce only more communication from different points of view, being 'different environmental problems for the political system, for the economic system, for families, for the religious system, the medical system, and so on' (p. 231). Already there is a suggestion of the specific functions of different types of system here: each one of them has its own function with regard to the production of meaning. Luhmann mentions, for instance, the 'political function of producing collectively binding decisions, the economic function of securing the satisfaction of future wants', and the 'religious function of "interpreting the incomprehensible"' (p. 236).¹³ In all these cases, '*Functional differentiation* organizes communication processes around special functions to be fulfilled at the level of society' where personal motivation is irrelevant (ibid., italics in origi-

nal.).¹⁴ In all cases, no priority is assigned to one function over another; instead, 'every difference becomes the center of the world': 'The center is replaced by the pivot of difference, or, more precisely, of system/environment differences that are differentiated in the world and that thereby constitute the world' (1995; 208). For Luhmann, this diversity without hierarchy is proof of the modernity of the current era, of what he calls 'world society' (see for example Luhmann 1982; 248).

We have seen that for Luhmann, 'Society carries on communication, and whatever carries on communication is society' (1995; 408). For him, the fact that the social comprises a multitude of closed communication systems, each of which has a particular value as a mode of communication, is simply a reflection of the variety of means used to bring about this end. These systems begin to diverge from one another as a result of their exclusive dependence on different media. For instance, Luhmann states that: 'the differentiation of the economy is a consequence of the use of money; the differentiation of politics a consequence of the use of power; the differentiation of science a consequence of the use of truth' (1998; 6). To a degree, the model here is Parsons's account of 'generalised symbolic media' as a means of communication. However, Luhmann is highly sceptical about the idea that

¹³ There are many other examples: the 'system of scientific research pursues the function of discriminating clearly between true and false propositions', while the 'educational system oscillates between liberal education (reflecting on its own identity), and vocational education (performance). Its function might be described as the socialization of individuals as an adequate environment for future social systems' (Luhmann 1982; 240, 241).

¹⁴ Clearly for Luhmann, there is 'no way back to the meaning of originative experience in Husserl's sense. Nor is there any plausible way to base systems theory on a Weberian concept of meaningful action' (Luhmann 1982; 232).

systems and their media make sense only with reference to human action. For him:

Parsons considers the emergence of media to be a *consequence* of the functional differentiation of the action system (and this is already implied in the concept of action). [...] I feel unable to adopt this theoretical model, because I doubt whether a complete functional matrix (the four-function paradigm) and thus a complete theory of symbolically generalized media can be deduced from the concept of action (ibid., italics in original.).

Luhmann's widespread use of the term 'symbolically generalised *communication* media' (see for instance 1995; 161, my italics) also reflects these concerns; in his view, systems in their media and in their differentiated significance are simply functional units for classifying information and 'cannot be conceived as action, nor can the process of communication be conceived as a chain of actions' (ibid.; 164). The implications of this dispute are spelled out by Luhmann, who simply states: 'We no longer have a knowledge of psychological and social systems that can be integrated' (2002; 155).

Success and Failure of Communication

Unusually for a communications theorist, since it involves systematically incorporating improbability into this entire field of study, Luhmann argues that all meaningful messages must confront serious problems.¹⁵ For him the barriers to communication are daunting, and its success highly complex. He writes: 'If one

looks more closely, one comes upon a number of problems, a number of obstructions that communication must overcome in order to happen at all' (1995; 158). More specifically, Luhmann identifies three aspects of the improbable in communicative efficacy. The first is that meaning is ambiguous and relies for its effect on the contextual information that people provide from their own perception and memory: 'Only in context can meaning be understood, and context is, initially, supplied by one's own perceptual field and memory' (ibid.).¹⁶ The second is focused on whether a form of communication can be extended from any point in space and time to those who did not directly experience it, while leaving the connotations that accompanied it intact: 'It is improbable for a communication to reach more persons than are present in a concrete situation, and this improbability grows if one makes the additional demand that the communication be reproduced unchanged' (ibid.). Third, Luhmann also questions the 'success' of communications, for even those who understand their meanings may tend to reject them in favour of other readings: 'Even if a communication is understood by the person it reaches, this does not guarantee that it is accepted and followed' (ibid.). It may well be that, 'If ego understands a communication, he has more reason to reject it' (ibid.; 158, 159). In this sense, all these factors 'reciprocally reinforce and limit themselves', for 'Once one problem is solved, the solution of the others is even less probable. The suppressed

¹⁵ A similar point is made in King and Thornhill (2005; 15).

¹⁶ Luhmann adds that what is discovered is often based on misunderstanding, even with the appropriate context.

improbability transfers itself, so to speak, into other problems' (ibid.; 159).

These problems are also reflected in the technical developments aimed at addressing communicative dysfunction. Luhmann writes of language, reproducible media and symbolic media as 'evolutionary achievements', ones that 'interdependently ground the processing of information and increase what can be produced by societal communication' (ibid.; 162). Yet, although language as a system of signs, linguistic or otherwise, is capable of carrying communication beyond one particular point, and although its copying and circulation through writing, printing and electronics permits a set of meanings to cover great spatio-temporal expanses (see Luhmann 1995; 160, 161; and Luhmann 1994; 32), for Luhmann, such combinations of reproduction and representation only become ever more problematic. Firstly, there are the failings of semiotic technique: 'Neither is meaning a sign nor does the semiotic technique of language explain which selection of signs will be successful in the communicative process' (1995; 160). Secondly, the use of reproducible media in itself only increases the amount of data, making it 'even more doubtful which communication will succeed and be able to motivate acceptance' (ibid.; 161). In either case, Luhmann suggests, communication seems unlikely to be effective.

With symbolic media (like money), the difficulty is a historical one. Especially when used in combination with language and reproduction techniques, the 'most successful and most relevant communication in contemporary society is played out through these media of

communication' (ibid.). But for such media to be particularly effective as a means of communication, they must first appear as what Luhmann calls 'codes' within functionally differentiated systems, in a development that for him marks the beginning of modernity – before this process starts, they are not clearly separated from other media and thus are not reliable enough to be functional. Their 'gradual evolution' (ibid.; 162) to a stage at which they can be seen as a coding of information which aids in the elucidation of function is possible in part because 'a sufficiently effective semantics has become available by means of which one can distinguish between the use of money and the use of power, etc. (which, for example, was not possible on the basis of land ownership alone)' (1998; 6-7). This development can be expressed in another way through self-reference: it is when a medium refers only to itself that it may become codified, the implication being that it can then produce a closed system. For instance Luhmann says in relation to love, a medium that for him, interestingly, was codified (in printed language) well before other media, that 'Once a special semantics has become sufficiently differentiated, the processes ordered by this medium can also become self-referential': 'then one can postulate that love is only to be motivated by love, i.e. love refers to love, seeks love, and grows to the extent that it finds love and can fulfil itself as love. [...] Via self-referentiality, in other words, codification becomes (at the semantic level) a closed system' (ibid; 31, 30, 29). Indeed for Luhmann all media, though in 'a very different way and for very different interactive constellations', go through such a

process (1995; 161). Once this has happened, they can be thought of as:

codes which offer relatively improbable communicative intentions, nevertheless some prospect of success; or as codes which exclude fairly effectively the danger of abuse or of illusion or of errors in the use of particular symbols. Media underpin relatively improbable communication. [...] In this capacity, media codes can be conceived of as catalysts which necessarily bring about a differentiation of complex social systems, once their use has become sufficiently dependable and constant enough to be foreseeable (Luhmann 1998; 60).

One consequence of this view is that for Luhmann the differentiation of contemporary society is the result not so much of a division of labour (as in Marx or Durkheim) as of a categorisation of discourse. But beyond this, it is important to realise that in Luhmann's model, 'without function systems to organize communications for society, there would be no basis on which the meaning of communication could be transmitted intact, that is without a high probability of distortion and misunderstanding' (King and Thornhill 2005; 16).

We have seen that symbolically generalised media in their functional progression are transformed into codes that refer to themselves, and that functional systems use as their basis those media that have concluded the process. In general terms, codes are 'abstract and universally applicable distinctions' (Luhmann 2006; 78), by which systems can produce their own sense

of their surroundings and, in doing so, can also distinguish themselves from other systems and from the world at large. More specifically, codes are constructed from binary terms by which the system in question determines 'which operations belong to the system and which operations (coded differently or not coded at all) are going on in the environment of the system' (Luhmann 2000b; 17). Science, politics and law, for instance, have as their codes: scientific truth/untruth, power/non-power, legal/non-legal. That these codes, at their simplest, take the form of polar opposites is to do with the production and reproduction of the systems themselves and thus the capacity to communicate, though as we shall see, codes (and thus systems) cannot endure as though it were simply a matter of selecting one side or the other; rather both sides are in constant contact in an 'oscillation' between the two poles (see Luhmann 1998b; 14; and Luhmann 2002; 84.). In his analysis of the mass media as a system, which, as one might expect, is constructed from the code of information and non-information,¹⁷ Luhmann writes that:

in order to have the freedom of seeing something as information or not, there must also be a possibility of thinking that something is non-informative. Without such a reflexive value the system would be at the mercy of everything that comes its way; and that also means it would be unable to distinguish itself from the environment, to organize its own reduction of complexity, its own selection (2000b; 17).

¹⁷ The point being, as Luhmann says, that 'Whatever we know about our society, or indeed about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media'; he continues by putting the status of empirical knowledge into question: when for instance sociologists rely on statistical and empirical analysis they 'always already know what they know and what they don't know – from the mass media' (Luhmann 2000b; 1, 123f.).

So it is through their codes that systems may build meaning from what would otherwise remain an environment of meaningless flux. Given the uncertainty surrounding their 'fluid, constantly changing foundation', both in terms of the billions¹⁸ who wish to read their own meanings into the information around them, and of the threats to which the physical fabric of the media that underpin them are subject, the task of making sense of a seemingly arbitrary reality may seem unlikely.¹⁹ Yet, Luhmann argues, this task is generally accomplished, partly because content *per se* has little meaning within the systems themselves, so blocking out the full extent of flux – and indeed, we shall see that these systems (unlike in Parsons) are not spatially but formally bordered, that 'the attention of the system has limitations and observes only

forms' (2002; 84; see also 1995; especially 145, 445). But also, beyond this, for Luhmann the simple fact of the persistence of systems and their codes says something about the extent of their success: 'They make trust possible, if not in fact necessary' (1998a; 6).²⁰ We should now consider more fully how communication systems are formed in practice.

On the principle that 'three selections must be synthesized in order for communication to appear as an emergent occurrence', Luhmann writes of communication as a 'three-part selection process': the 'selectivity of the information itself', the 'selection of the utterance' and the 'possibilities of understanding' (1995; 140, 141-2, 143). This schema is partly an attack on the belief that communication is a straightforward process. The various forms of

¹⁸ In a well-known passage, Luhmann writes that there are 'now approximately five billion psychological systems. It has to be asked which of these five billion is intended' (Luhmann 1990a; 78).

¹⁹ Luhmann asks: 'How is communication possible if it has such a fluid, constantly changing foundation? How can communication reproduce itself if it must rely on a multitude of nervously vibrating brains and agitated minds? How can it rely on systems that will realize their own production only through a constant change of conditions, that is, through creating other structures from one moment to the next in order to actualize the next condition?' (Luhmann 2002; 171). Of the 'physicality of sounds and signs' he writes: 'all communication depends on the cooperation of conscious minds' and 'it must therefore assume a perceptible form, either acoustically or optically, in the media of possible perception'. Nevertheless, under their 'minimal restrictions of perceptibility and therefore with the participation of consciousness', communications systems as formal devices can still differentiate themselves 'on the sole basis of self-produced communication' (Luhmann 1994; 29).

²⁰ Luhmann here more than implies that functional systems in modern society are not actually founded on trust. So when King and Schütz write of the 'enormous success' that these systems have achieved through their codes and their media, this is not overstating the case (see King and Schütz 1994; 269). For Luhmann, what explains their persistence in society, at least in part, is simply that the conscious mind is 'extremely attracted to what is conspicuously communicated by language' (Luhmann 2002; 177). As he puts it elsewhere, 'communication is set up in such a way that it fascinates consciousness by the use of first-level forms and carries it away by the use of second-level forms. Especially significant communication is, in the first instance, formed in such a rhapsodic manner, using the acoustic medium, and only its secondary encoding in phonetic writing makes possible a certain distance' (Luhmann 1994; 29-30).

the metaphor of 'transmission', in particular, are the target here: the metaphor suggests that in the utterance something has been lost; it gives too much priority to the 'act' of the utterance, or to the intention of the 'utterer'; it assumes that the meaning of a message is essentially the same for both sender and receiver; and it implies that the sender speaks directly to the receiver as if the two were in an unmediated relationship – as if communication were a two-part process (ibid.; 139, 140.).²¹ For Luhmann, all these claims carry 'too much ontology', and this is why he avoids the use of the terms 'sender' and 'receiver' altogether, not to say subject and object, or self and other, except as ironic devices; his own substitutions are 'alter' and 'ego', or 'utterer' and 'addressee' (ibid.; 139, 140-1).

Particularly important is the first part of Luhmann's schema, the 'selectivity of the information'. This is because 'selective attention is actualized only in reference to the very selectivity of information' so that 'Communication grasps *something* out of the actual referential horizon

that it itself constitutes and leaves *other things aside*' (ibid.; 140, italics in original). On this view, the act of attention that information requires, including the opinions it contains, marks off a discrete domain of experience in which coherent meaning can be generated, if only because the focus of attention has been diverted from the plethora of meanings outside it, and for Luhmann in that very act a communicating system has been formed between the utterer and the addressee.²² Within this discrete domain, what follows cannot be completely arbitrary: it is rather, Luhmann argues, that the 'combination of information, utterance, and expectation of success in one act of attention presupposes "coding"'. The suggestion here is that because 'it is the operative unification of information and utterance, coding must be treated by ego and alter in the same way. This requires adequate standardization – again a difference vis-à-vis the surroundings that is conspicuous and attracts attention to itself' (ibid.; 142, my italics).²³ It is in relation to this difference between inner and

²¹ In relation to the products of conscious motivation, Luhmann writes: 'the utterance is nothing more than a selection proposal, a suggestion. Communication emerges only to the extent that this suggestion is picked up, that its stimulation is processed' (Luhmann 1995; 139).

²² In this sense, Norbert Bolz is right when he says that Luhmann's basic idea is that 'individuals take concrete form by becoming involved in systems', and that 'individuality only forms when one enters into the systems and institutions and allows oneself to be consumed by them' (Bolz 2003; 102).

²³ This standardisation should be connected to Luhmann's idea of 'double contingency', in which 'ego experiences alter as alter ego' and vice versa (in other words, the two are what Luhmann calls 'black boxes' for each other, that is, entirely unpredictable) (1995; 121-2, 109). He continues that such a 'doubling of improbability' actually 'leads to probability', in that it helps to generate and settle expectations, for if in addition to 'one's own behavioural uncertainty, another's behavioural selection also is uncertain and depends on one's own behaviour, the possibility arises of orienting oneself to that and determining one's own behaviour in regard to it' (p. 117). The idea here is that communication systems emerge as a direct result of the contingency of particular social situations. Within these systems, the entire range of responses open to the participants is narrowed allowing communication to proceed. What they ideally expect from one another in itself then acquires 'structural value for building emergent systems and a certain kind of reality (= connective value)'

outer that we should see Luhmann's comment that 'coded events operate as information in the communication process, uncoded ones as disturbance (noise)' (ibid.). In that a space has been marked off from what stands outside it, what constitutes noise is only what the act of attention pushes into a marginal position. Or to put it differently, viewed from within this space, which is bordered by what it includes and what it excludes, everything else appears as background noise. But it is not simply that since, within the borders of this space, communication can hardly go on independently of external reference.²⁴ Rather, what has been generated here is 'a completely closed system, which is simultaneously open to any further conditioning that would help it to constrain its possibilities' (ibid.; 133). We can visualise it by a circle, as Luhmann notes: 'When one draws a circle, the world is not just outside but also inside the circle; it is what is severed by the circle' (2000a; 33). In this sense, then, inside and outside are inextricably linked: 'Selectivity as such attracts further communication: it recruits communications that direct themselves to aspects that selectivity has excluded' (1995;

140). Already there is a degree of predictability at work here: a set of borders has been drawn up, an infinite set of possibilities has been closed off, to be replaced by what Luhmann calls 'the processing of selection' – by communication, in short, which is also described as 'coordinated selectivity' (ibid.; 140, 157). As King and Thornhill suggest, once a communication system is formed, every statement 'may be attributed meaning through a process of selection – *it either belongs to the communication system or it does not*. Then, if it is seen as belonging to the system, any further selection is confined to a manageable and finite number of choices – it either means this or it means something else *which has meaning within the system's boundaries*' (King and Thornhill 2005; 17, emphasis in original).

This last effect can be described by looking at the restricted nature of the options available from the perspective of the addressee. Assuming that 'ego fixes his own state on the basis of uttered information' (Luhmann 1995; 154) – assuming, that is, the 'selection of the utterance' – the addressee has, at base, only the choice of accepting or rejecting the content of

(p. 110). Because for Luhmann such systems are formed whenever, 'two black boxes, by whatever accident, come to have dealings with one another', he can say that "'Pure" double contingency, that is, a completely indeterminate situation, never occurs in our societal reality' (pp. 109, 118). The notion of double contingency was previously put forward by Parsons: Luhmann, of course, wants a 'subject free' version as he puts it and thus for him, 'the absorption of uncertainty runs its course by stabilizing expectations, not by stabilizing behaviour' (pp. 118, 110). For his critique of Parsons's use of the concept, see Luhmann (ibid.; 110-1, 123-4). On black boxes, see for example Glanville (1979; 35-42).

²⁴ As Luhmann has it: 'Without "noise," no system' (1995; 116). Elsewhere, he says that 'Social systems come into being on the basis of the noise that psychic systems create in their attempts to communicate' (p. 214). It should be noted that Luhmann's arguments here are strongly influenced by Heinz von Foerster's principle of 'order from noise' (see for example von Foerster 1960; 31-50).

the message presented; and in both cases what is involved are the 'possibilities of understanding'. These include, as a matter of course, more or less 'extensive misunderstandings', although these can be 'controlled and corrected' (ibid.; 141). Where the acceptance of a message takes place, it can simply be put down to the success of communication in the sense of a 'successful coupling of selections' (ibid.; 159). From an addressee's point of view, 'Acceptance can mean action corresponding to the directives communicated, but also experience, thinking, or processing further information under the assumption that certain information is correct' (ibid.). For Luhmann none of this (except perhaps on essentialist terms) means that there is a causal connection between the utterer and the addressee: 'my consent is consent only in relation to your consent. But my consent is not your consent and there is no objective argument or rational ground (except the object domain) that could finally guarantee this coincidence' (ibid.; 75). Moreover, the acceptance of content

requires confirmation²⁵ in another response – which means forming a further connection, distinct from the previous one: when 'one communicative act follows another, it tests whether the preceding communication was understood' (ibid.; 143).

On the other hand, there is always the option to reject, since 'Every proposition, every demand opens up possibilities for negation: not this but that, not this way, not now', and so forth (ibid.; 154). Again, however, a rejection does not alter the fact that communication has taken place, for 'communication is present if ego holds the information to be inappropriate, does not want to comply with the wish it tells him of, or would not like to obey the norm to which it relates'; in other words, 'the *possibility* of rejection is *necessarily* built into the communication process' (ibid.; italics in original).

Apart from the point that communication carries on functioning whatever the response, which has clear implications for all critique,²⁶ what is happening here in different ways is 'the

²⁵ Luhmann cites as an influence here Charles Warriner's idea of confirmation as a central device of communication. Warriner writes that the 'acts of confirmation by both actors complete the communication process. Each actor then knows that the other knows that he knows what the other "had in mind"' (Warriner in Luhmann 1995; 530f.).

²⁶ Luhmann writes: 'the *concept* of communication has nothing to do with acceptance or rejection, or with further reaction' (Luhmann 1995; 148, italics in original). This point may be elaborated by reference to critique. For Luhmann all that a 'critical attitude' can do to a system is 'enrich it, provide it with qualities of meaning that give it better chances' for 'self-observation' (p. 460). This applies even to a critique that fixes on the contradictions inherent within the system itself. 'All forms of contradictory communication occur through a meaning that is selected for them, and this selection orients itself to the social system's structural selections': 'Contradictions signal – and this is their function – that contact can be broken off. The social system can stop' – but the 'signal merely warns, merely flares up, is merely an event – and suggests action in response' (p. 373). Of the distinction between 'critical' and 'affirmative' intellectuals, he writes that whoever 'opts for "critical"' (as do most intellectuals) must have an affirmative attitude towards the distinction itself, and whoever 'opts for "affirmative"' must accept a distinction which also allows one to adopt a critical attitude. This is why observers who choose this distinction must remain invisible.

observation of alter by ego', in that 'Ego is in a position to *distinguish* the utterance from what is uttered' (ibid.; 143, my italics). This observation, whether based on understanding or misunderstanding, of the difference between the form and content of the information is critical to communication when viewed as a system of 'coordinated selectivity', or a 'state of conditional readiness' that rests on 'an understanding of the preceding communication' and awaits the next response, 'however surprising the connecting communication may turn out to be' (ibid.; 122, 143).²⁷ And, indeed, Luhmann writes that the way 'ego distinguishes two selections' is what makes 'communication communication, a special case of information processing per se' (ibid.; 143). It is easy to see how this whole operation repeats itself from a different perspective, in which the utterer, in turn, is presented with new information and again a restricted set of choices from which to select: 'If alter knows

that he is being observed, he can take over this difference between information and utterance and appropriate it, develop it, exploit it, and use it (more or less successfully) to steer the communicative process' (ibid.).

Luhmann is clear about the implication of all this, which is that communication is possible '*only as a self-referential process*' (ibid., emphasis in original). More specifically, while all communication 'depends on its environment as a source of energy and information', the '*unity* of communication corresponds to nothing in the environment'; rather, communication has acquired an autonomy through its 'conditioning of communicative syntheses' (ibid.; 144, italics in original). In its independent and discrete domain, statements refer inwards to one another, each statement being constructed from earlier statements of the same kind: 'the process must be composed of elements (events) that refer to themselves by including their connection with

At best, they can say: I am the paradox of my distinction, the unity of what I claim is different' (Luhmann 2000b; 121).

²⁷ 'This implies time' (Luhmann 1995; 143) as Luhmann has it – and more particularly a time of waiting in a suspended state as the system completes a communication and awaits the response, the implication being that the system has its own time, or as Luhmann puts it, a 'system-internal time', which is 'not the time of the outside world but generalized within it' (p. 309). Elsewhere, describing the closure of systems, he adds that 'Their problem is to find operations that can be connected to the present state of the system. In this sense they are what Heinz von Foerster would call nontrivial machines or historical machines. They use self-referential operations to refer to their present state to decide what to do next' (Luhmann 2002; 103). What can be said, especially given the mechanical metaphor, is that the system operates in a continuous present; but here there is no Bergsonian opposition between lived and mechanical time, and no Marxist distinction between fictional temporality and historical process. It is not that Luhmann fails to address these themes: he writes, for instance, that 'Structures capture the reversibility of time because they hold open a limited repertoire of possibilities for choice', while 'Processes, by contrast, mark the irreversibility of time' (Luhmann 1995; 44). It is rather that he has a very different attitude to these issues, one that can be seen, certainly from a Marxist point of view, as having a politically conservative aspect: for instance, he argues, without hesitation, that 'the time that is measured chronologically is still the most secure one: no matter what happens, it continues on' (p. 309).

other elements of the same process' (ibid.). Further, the result could hardly be seen as a creation of the human mind flowing freely, since in all cases 'understanding is controlled', since in 'every instance individual communication is recursively selected in possibilities of understanding and the control of understanding as the connective context for further communication; otherwise it would never take place' (ibid.; 144, 143-4).

One implication of Luhmann's social theory is to throw into question the idea that criticism as the product of individual action or conscious intention has the potential to bring about social change. All critique must rely on the form of information as a vehicle for its meaning, and so even the most radical and wide-ranging critique will eventually play into the hands of pre-existing systems which ignore its content and operate only with its form (see for instance Luhmann 2002; 84). Criticism for Luhmann 'is not voluntarily radical; it must become radical in a peculiarly helpless fashion, because it can

no longer find a form to respect latent functions and structures' (Luhmann 1995; 342). Yet it may be that this kind of questioning of criticism's efficacy and indeed its very possibility might actually help to strengthen it. Rather than signalling the end of critique, as Luhmann is apparently wont to do,²⁸ precisely by registering its limitations, he might actually be helping to make it more self-aware, and thus more able to offer a critique of the external world. A more self-reflexive critique, one that is aware of its own limits and possibilities, and that can from the start write this awareness into its own form, might be more effective at holding up contemporary society to examination, and at pointing to the possibility of something better than life as it currently exists. However, if we accept the fundamental tenets of Luhmann's theory, then such a critique, particularly in terms of its own intentionality, will be uncertain and provisional in its effects, confined to a particular time and context, and lacking in the modernist confidence of the past.²⁹

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²⁸ See for example Luhmann (1995; 339), where he notes that 'A functionally oriented system stimulates criticism because its unity resides in the principle that all its figures can be replaced under certain conditions. As a formula for criticism, the search for an "alternative" [to pre-existing systems] becomes a formula for legitimation pure and simple'. Unsurprisingly, then, Luhmann does not distinguish between what Bourdieu calls the 'positive and negative functions' of criticism, the latter being based on conscious opposition to power relations, the former being to ask what the alternatives might be (see Bourdieu 2003; 20-1).

²⁹ For a critical but sensitive analysis of the legacy of modernism see Harvey (1995; 10-38).

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SANTRAUKA

VEIKSMAS IR KOMUNIKACIJA NIKLASO LUHMANNO SOCIALINĖJE TEORIJOJE

Straipsnyje siekiama atskleisti keletą intriguojančių Niklaso Luhmanno socialinės teorijos aspektų. Trumpai aptarus, kaip Luhmannas nutolsta nuo ankstesnių funkcionalizmo formų (ypač Talcotto Parsonso idėjų) ir kaip jo darbai iš esmės skiriasi nuo esencializmo, fundamentalizmo ir humanizmo, parodoma, kuo svarbi jo siūloma nevaržomų socialinių struktūrų teorija. Kalbama apie tokias struktūras, kurių reprodukcija nepriklauso nuo išorinių veiksnių, o pati reprodukcija traktuojama kaip nesibaigiantis procesas, kuriame, Luhmanno teigimu, žmogiškieji subjektai ne vaidina jokio vaidmens. Vėliau kritinėje Luhmanno visuomenės teorijos analizėje pereinama prie svarstymų, koks vaidmuo tenka komunikacijai ir jos efektyvumą ribojantiems veiksniams, koks yra atotrūkis tarp žmogaus veiksmo ir komunikacijos sistemos. Straipsnio pabaigoje siekiama įvertinti, ar ir kaip Luhmanno teorija gali būti pritaikyta socialinėje kritikoje. Teigiama, kad nepaisant rimtų teorijos trūkumų, ji visgi gali atnaujinti visuomenės kritinę mintį ir suteikti jai naują kryptį.

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