

Systemic supertheorist of the social

Niklas Luhmann, 1927–1998

Openly dreaming of eternal life, Gaston Bachelard conceived of paradise as one huge library with miles of stacks, crammed with books. For Niklas Luhmann, the great German sociologist and metaphysician who recently died at the age of 70, after a protracted period of sickness, paradise probably looks more like an endless filing cabinet. He was a one-man theory factory that produced more than 40 books and at least 350 journal articles over forty years. Luhmann explains his immense productivity with a modest reference to his famous system of *Zettelkasten*, file cards with thematic cross-references. He declared that he actually spent more time arranging and rearranging his system of file cards than writing books – several at the same time, since when stuck on one he immediately started another. Yet he is still not widely read in English.

The main reason for this remarkable neglect is the sheer difficulty and complexity of Luhmann's characteristic brand of systems theory. Not that Luhmann writes jargon (*à la* Habermas) or long and complicated sentences (*à la* Bourdieu), but his theory is pitched at such a high level of abstraction and reflexivity that it is often hard to see its relevance, even for those who are used to more metaphysical bedtime reading. Moreover, Luhmann draws on a multiplicity of trans-disciplinary traditions, such as general systems theory (Bertalanffy), second-order cybernetics (Von Foerster), modular theory of logic (Spencer Brown) and constructivist theories of knowledge (Maturana and Varela), with which sociologists and philosophers are usually not well acquainted. Finally, Luhmann's mode of presentation is non-linear. One can enter the theory by a multiplicity of conceptual gates – such as complexity, contingency, system, environment, meaning, communication, self-reference, openness through closure, and so forth – but as one can never be sure to be on the right track, it is often tempting to go for the next exit. In this respect, the theory resembles more a labyrinth than a highway to a happy end.

If Habermas is the leading German philosopher, Luhmann was the leading German sociologist. Together, they held a joint seminar at the beginning of the 1970s at the Max Planck Institut in Starnberg.

This resulted in a co-authored book, *Theory of Society or Social Technology – What is Achieved by Systems Theory?*, followed by four volumes of commentary on the debate. The title, obviously chosen by Habermas, suggests that Luhmann's systems theory, which conceptualizes the public sphere in such a way that legitimation becomes an affair of the political system itself and thus a form of organized self-legitimation, represents the most sophisticated expression of the technocratic spirit. In fact, Luhmann was destined to become a technocrat. He studied law at Freiburg (1946–49) and worked for several years as a civil servant at the Ministry of Education and Culture of Lower Saxony (1956–62). In 1960–61 he spent a year at Harvard University, where he encountered Talcott Parsons. This meeting, together with his preoccupation with philosophy (Descartes, Kant and especially Husserl) and early functionalist anthropology (Malinowski and Radcliff-Brown), led Luhmann into a career as sociologist. His sociology is in fact best understood as a synthesis of Husserlian transcendental phenomenology and functionalist systems theory, thus as a kind of cybernetic phenomenology in which the system takes the place of the transcendental ego – with all the problems of solipsism which such a systemic reformulation of Husserl entails. Having successfully defended a Ph.D. and a Habilitation thesis under the direction of Helmut Schelsky, Luhmann qualified on the fast track at the University of Münster. In 1969, he became professor in sociology at the newly founded University of Bielefeld.

If Habermas is the Kant of social theory, Luhmann is its Hegel. 'Society', 'communication' and 'system' replace 'spirit', 'substance' and 'history'. Like Hegel, Luhmann wants to bring the present time to its highest conceptual level and incorporate the entire universe into his system. But unlike Hegel, his last word is not identity but difference – the 'difference of identity and difference'. Luhmann's social theory is a systemic supertheory of the social. This theory is universal in that it is a theory of everything, of the world, as seen and reconstructed from the standpoint of sociology, including a theory of itself. It is systemic because it

uses the guiding difference (*Leitdifferenz*) between the system and the environment as its main conceptual tool to analyse the production and reproduction of the social. Analysing society as a hypercomplex conglomerate of social subsystems, Luhmann insists that modern societies are so complex that his own theory of social complexity can offer only one possible formulation of the social among others.

Luhmann's basic attitude towards the world is one of ironic distance. His basic vision of the world is one of wonder. Everything that is could in principle be different, but in practice there is not much that could make a difference. How this 'optimism of the intellect' is countered by a 'pessimism of the will' can be seen in his almost cynical appreciation of the defeat of the Third Reich. Unlike Habermas, who describes himself without irony as a typical product of postwar re-education, Luhmann provocatively declares that he remembers only one thing about the liberation – that American soldiers beat him up and stole his watch.

At the most abstract level, Luhmann's social theory offers a systemic analysis of the social ordering of chaos through the reduction of complexity into a contingent cosmos. This reduction of complexity is effectuated through communication. Through communication contingency is reduced. Some possibilities are realized, others are excluded, and, thanks to com-

munication, the world becomes relatively predictable. Communications produce communications, and when those can be linked to each other and structured in a relatively predictable way, society emerges. Society is made up of communications and nothing but communications. Elephants, fish and chips or cars do not belong to society. What is not a communication does not belong to society but to its environment. At this fateful point, systems theory takes an anti-humanist turn. If society is made up of communications, people are definitively not. They thus belong to the environment. And if they belong to the environment, they do not communicate. Only communications communicate, and given that society is nothing else but the totality of the communications, people are not only expelled from society, but they can hardly intervene in it either. When the distinction between the environment and the system is reproduced within the system, the system is 'outdifferentiated' (*ausdifferenziert*) and subsystems emerge that, thanks to functional specialization and sectorial delimitation of their spheres of interest and disinterest, are able to further reduce the complexity of the environment, by specifying which communications belong the system and which do not (i.e. by selectively attributing each element of the world either to the system itself or to its environment.)

The system can only communicate about the environment within itself. It cannot communicate with the environment. Society has no centre and no head. Representation of the social totality is impossible and so is steering. The world may be adrift like a ship without moorings, but given that there is and can no longer be a captain on board to coordinate and steer the operations of the different subsystems, the rhetorics of anxiety of the critical theorists only show the superfluity of their normative mode of thought and their incapacity to come to terms with the hypercomplexity of modern societies. The functional specialization has increased the rationality of each of the social subsystems, but only at the price of the irrationality of the global system. That is the ultimate and demoralising message of 'sociological enlightenment'.

Luhmann literally demoralizes the world. He has given up hope and given away the normative foundations of social criticism. In exchange, we get romanticism without *Sehnsucht* and its methodological complement; irony that shows us again and again the improbability of the probable, but hardly or never the possibility of the improbable.

English-speaking readers who are unacquainted with Luhmann's work are recommended to start with *The Differentiation of Society* (Columbia U.P, 1982)

and move on to *Ecological Communication* (Chicago, 1989), which not only presents the main ideas of *Social Systems* (Stanford University Press, 1995) in a more accessible fashion, but, like *Risk: A Sociological Theory* (De Gruyter, 1993) also offers a good introduction to Luhmann's diagnosis of modernity. *Observa-*

tions on Modernity (Stanford University Press, 1988) offers both a reasonably accessible introduction to Luhmann's late interest in the paradoxical implications of 'second-order cybernetics' and a good sense of his intervention in the debate on postmodernism.

Frédéric Vandenberghe

CONFERENCE REPORT

Paideia

The Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy, Boston, 10–17 August 1998

It was announced in the introductory session that the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy was the largest gathering of philosophers (three thousand plus) in history and the last world congress of the twentieth century. The congress theme, grandly enough, was 'Paideia: Philosophy Educating Humanity'. From the opening platform it was asserted that 'the clash between civilizations needs to be mediated and interpreted philosophically' and that 'only philosophy can raise our children to confront these issues with wisdom'. It was as if, amidst such declarations of solemn purpose, portentous fact and significant number, we were being tacitly enjoined to see ourselves as clasping hands, across the millennia, with the inhabitants of the Academy and the Lyceum.

The theme was echoed in a smattering of plenary papers, among the best of which was Martha Nussbaum's, whose discussion ranged from an entertaining account of alternative models of education in Aristophanes' *The Clouds* to a report of how philosophy has helped to broaden the imaginative and critical horizons of Chicago law students. The theme was also picked up, after a fashion, in the opening address from the principal of the University of Boston, a sometime teacher of philosophy, who used the occasion to deliver a defence of rationality, liberal tolerance and universal values (which, one surmised, all come to the same thing) against self-refuting relativism. The self-refuting relativists and relativisms he had in mind were the usual culprits, Nietzsche, Marx and Freud – all advocates, in one way or another, of the self-refuting idea that mind is in some way determined – together with postmodernists, feminists and sundry self-refut-

ing assaulters of reason and rationality. It was the kind of self-assured tirade that is apt to make rational and reasonable non-postmodernists (such as myself) cringe. After a few pot-shots at self-refuting abstracts for papers to be presented later in the conference, he announced that the organizers, solid reliable types no doubt, had 'diplomatically avoided' asking whether relativists are really philosophers, and applauded their inclusion in the programme, by means of which we could compound their self-refuting ways, by proving them wrong by our tolerance and learn from them, as from signposts for the unwary traveller, as we forged ahead on the straight road to truth.

It was, at any rate, difficult to tell what selection procedures the redoubtable organizers had applied to submitted papers, reasonable or relativist. Some were good, some bad and some, no doubt, self-refuting. Most areas and schools of philosophy were represented, along with many societies and organizations, with the (not overwhelming) majority belonging to those subjects and approaches considered mainstream in the English-speaking philosophical world. What it did or meant for philosophy or humanity is difficult to say. Most of the paper-givers and delegates appeared to get on with the business of presenting papers, listening, networking and sightseeing with, save the odd chuckle, little or no thought to the conference theme. I don't doubt that they got something of value from the conference, but I wonder how much of that had anything to do with educating humanity or that funny Greek word, *paideia*.

Kevin Magill