The Society of Society: The Grand Finale of Niklas Luhmann*

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This paper introduces Niklas Luhmann’s final work, Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft (The Society of Society). According to Luhmann, sociologists have failed to produce even a partially adequate theory of society. Epistemological obstacles and humanist concerns for rationality and justice have prevented true progress in the discipline. With his “radically antihumanist, radically antiregional, and radically constructivistic” social system theory, Luhmann intends to bring about a sociological enlightenment. Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft focuses on communication as the only genuinely social phenomenon. Social systems differentiate and evolve as they communicate in three separate dimensions: the social, temporal, and functional. The path of evolution results from a history of variation, selection, and restabilization within these dimensions. Communication, bit by bit, produces social structures that, recursively, produce future structures. Society is communication. Sociology, as the science of society, is communication about how different societal systems operate, communicate, evolve, and maintain their boundaries.

When Niklas Luhmann began his career as a sociologist at the University of Bielefeld in 1969, his colleagues confronted him with the question of his research agenda. The former lawyer replied that his project was to develop a “theory of society.” He added that it would take him thirty years and not cost anything.

Luhmann completed this project to his apparent satisfaction. The capstone of his career, which ended with his death in 1998, is entitled Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft — the society of society (~ 1997). The two-volume work integrates and builds upon his previous studies, which have already attracted an international audience. As a grand theorist, Luhmann attempts to describe fundamental features common to all societal systems, such as the economy, law, religion, art, science, and even sociology. Not only do all societal systems share similar structures, but they also all operate through communication. Hence, Luhmann asserts, society is communication.

Luhmann’s book critically evaluates and modifies “the only systematic sociological theory that currently exists:” the work of Talcott Parsons (~ 21). Luhmann revises Parsons’s theory of functionally differentiated social systems by incorporating major ideas from five different sources. (1) His sense of logic, the “logic of forms,” is borrowed from the mathematician George Spencer-Brown. Instead of focusing on understanding the nature of objects, Luhmann looks at the nature of observing and of the need for drawing distinctions. (2) He borrows the principles of self-reference and autopoiesis from the cognitive biologists Humberto Maturana and Francesco Varela. A system is no longer thought to depend on its environment. Rather, a “closed” social system creates itself and its environment. (3) Luhmann’s practical concern with the problems of consciousness, complexity, space, and

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1 All subsequent citations refer to pages in Niklas Luhmann’s, Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft. The author of this article translated all quotations.
time bears the mark of Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology. (4) The recurrent theme of an emerging “world society” that is transcending former cultural and political boundaries follows the thought of G. W. F. Hegel. (5) Finally, Luhmann adopts a pragmatic, open-ended, nonessentialist philosophy that he identifies as social constructivism. Luhmann’s “radical constructivism” is uniquely influenced by the work of Heinz von Foerster and Humberto Maturana, and should not be confused with the more familiar “social construction of reality” paradigm popularized by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1967). Constructivism plays a central role in the book and will be explained in detail below.

The first part of Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft, Chapter One, offers an introduction to the fundamental concepts used in system theory. Among other things, Luhmann discusses meaning (Sinn), communication, system and environment, structural coupling, functional equivalents, complexity, and the world society. The first part of the book makes the case for viewing society as a single, autopoietic, self-referential social system. In the second part of the book, Chapters Two through Four, Luhmann addresses three distinct aspects of the societal system (Gesellschaftsystem): communication, evolution, and differentiation. Finally, in the third part of the book, Chapter Five, Luhmann explains how communication operates as the fundamental dynamic in his sociology of knowledge. The way in which societies communicate about themselves, how they self-describe themselves, is intricately tied to their social structure. Structural changes in society (for example, increased functional differentiation or the invention of the printing press, e-mail, or recombinant DNA technology2) can invalidate self-descriptions. From Luhmann’s point of view, however, semantic changes follow structural changes at a distance. Meaningful self-descriptions of modern society will emerge only after we accept that the semantic traditions of “Old-Europe” have fallen into meaninglessness (1142).

I. THE DARK AGES AND THE FAILURE OF SOCIOLOGY

Luhmann begins his 1,200-page work by bluntly asserting that sociologists have failed to produce even a partially adequate theory of society (17). He acknowledges that classical and contemporary sociological texts continue to entertain readers with provocative and fascinating observations of what various authors called “society.” Nonetheless, no genuine progress has ever been made toward constructing a scientific theory of society. This is because sociologists have inherited “epistemological obstacles” that block their path toward adequate scientific analysis. Instead of helping us understand our “hypercomplex” social system, our worn-out methods of communicating as sociologists lead us to produce research that is unconvincing and intellectually medieval. Luhmann’s goal is nothing less than to bring about a sociological enlightenment.

Luhmann argues that four different false premises have condemned sociological reasoning to failure, each one adding to the confusion caused by the others. Sociologists have incorrectly assumed that:

1. society is comprised of concrete individuals;
2. society is integrated because of consensus shared by individuals about their values and interests;
3. political or territorial boundaries differentiate societies from one another;
4. societies, like groups of people, may be observed and understood from outside their own boundaries. (24–5)

2Luhmann does not often provide concrete examples to illustrate his abstract concepts. For the sake of clarity, the author occasionally takes liberty to provide such.
Leaving the Dark Ages of sociology behind him, Luhmann presents a sociology that removes human beings from the center of the social system and throws them, body and soul, into the system’s environment (30). He characterizes this new perspective on society as “radically antihumanist, radically antiregional, and radically constructivistic” (35).

Luhmann rejects the “Old-European” notion that individuals participate in a naturally ordered society as whole beings. The fundamental unit of society is communication, he suggests, not the individual human actor. “Society does not weigh exactly as much as all people combined, nor does its weight change with every birth and death” (26). Individuals, seen as separate entities, are socially meaningless. One does not locate society inside individuals but between them. Society exists only when individuals communicate. Until they begin to communicate, individuals are not in society. And when they do communicate—when they do participate in society—individuals do so to a very limited extent, never as “whole persons.” The limits of society are established by the limits of communication. All that is not communicated remains outside of society.

Luhmann rejects the prevailing assumption that society is held together by consensus between individual members of society about their common moral values, ideas, or mutual interests. From Plato to Hegel and from Parsons to Habermas, most social theorists emphasize the integrating force of some form of common human reason and rationality. Durkheimians speak of the collective conscience, Weberians focus on intersubjectivity, and Marxists put their faith in class-consciousness. From a psychological point of view, how could such a collective understanding ever be actualized? How could so many brains be so well-integrated?

From Luhmann’s perspective, humanist theories of society are examples of metaphysical speculation and wishful thinking. Humanists want to believe that human beings possess an inherently valuable common essence. At the least, rationality, the ability to reason, ought to distinguish human beings from animals (171). Humanists would like to see social institutions reflect the natural dignity of men and women. As Juergen Habermas (and Rodney King) implores, would it not be nice if we could all just be reasonable and get along? Luhmann suggests that humanist thinkers are afraid to give up anthropocentric views of society because they fear losing moral ground, social cohesion, and the ability to criticize “inhumane” social institutions (30). Social systems, he counters, are deaf to the moralizing of actors. They can successfully operate whether or not they sustain human dignity, rationality, peace, prosperity, or other ideals.

Individuals are always more outside of society than inside it—they can only communicate about one thing at a time. Illustrating Luhmann’s point, this is why spies, thieves, liars, revolutionaries, and impostors are able to order pizza, attend a football game, be a president, participate in a church picnic, and participate in all kinds of other “normal” social activities. What one does not choose to communicate remains hidden in the environment until, alas, it is communicated. An individual is never completely social or anti-social. As long as communication occurs successfully, society works perfectly well without any kind of all-encompassing consensus or rationality: “Communication is also genuinely social in that it functions despite the fact that a ‘shared’ (collective) consciousness can in no manner and in no sense be created—consensus in the full sense, meaning total agreement, remains beyond reach” (82).

Just as the patriot and the spy can join each other in saluting the flag, people from different countries or territories can share society. In this era of globalization and worldwide interdependencies, it is normal for communication to occur across political and regional borders. According to Luhmann, sociologists have found it difficult to stop thinking about societies as political or territorial units, differentiated by clearly marked boundaries. It is no longer realistic to think that Brazil is a different society from Thailand, that the U.S. is a different society from Russia, that Uruguay is a different society from Paraguay (25).
Extending Luhmann’s discussion, we know that dollars effectively communicate desires in each of these countries. Men and women use different public bathrooms here and there. AT&T can make the necessary telephone connections. People drink Coke. They fly across time zones. Africans and South Americans convert to Mormonism and look toward Salt Lake City. Regional boundaries are no longer limits to communication and, therefore, can no longer contain societies. This does not imply that a Russian and Paraguayan are able to easily understand each other. For that matter, it does not imply that two Russians will always understand each other. Regardless of how much people believe they have in common, Luhmann emphasizes the “improbability” of successful communication. If individuals do manage successfully to communicate, if they do build society together, it is not due to their regional, national, or cultural backgrounds. Rather, it is by employing established systems of communication, building new understanding upon what was successfully communicated in the past.

Luhmann insists that the logic of every societal system grows out of that system’s own operations and history (82–83). Social systems construct themselves as they function. They have no objective essence—they have no metaphysical predisposition to be this way and not that way (60; 868–79). Systems are also not subjects—they cannot be reduced to some transcendent consciousness. Systems exist as the historical and continuing relations between things. As Ortega y Gasset wrote of humans, Luhmann writes that society has no nature—only history. Sociology, for instance, must be considered an emerging, contingent autopoietic system (34). Sociology cannot provide a final analysis, a complete picture, the end of a story. With his constructivistic sociology of knowledge, Luhmann emphasizes the value of observing from many different vantage points.

Luhmann rejects the idea that sociologists can understand the activities of others. As they observe the behavior of members of a social group, sociologists cannot hope to verstehen. At best, they will develop a way to talk about the group to other sociologists. Due to what Luhmann calls “operative closure,” only members of a group can understand what it is like to be in that group (92). The world of sociology is a special construction that is meaningful only to sociologists. It is a self-referential construction designed to handle its own affairs. Sociology is a system of communicating in a specified, limited way; we cannot share our truths with other systems, and they cannot share theirs with us.3 Sociology works for us, not for them. As long as this is admitted, Luhmann suggests, sociologists can playfully begin to develop useful ways to observe others. Among the many ways sociologists can observe, the right way to observe depends on the observer’s situation, not that of the observed.

Luhmann maintains that social systems cannot observe themselves from the outside (866). There is no way to gain the privileged distance of a stranger looking in. As a sociologist, for instance, one cannot escape to a point of view outside of society:

As long as one begins with a group of subjects, there are no problems with thinking of the observer of the subjects as an external observer, as a different subject. However, social theory must deny the possibility of adequate external observation. . . .

The system itself must make the observations of its observations, it must describe its own descriptions. (875)

3 While the same “truth” cannot be shared between social systems, Luhmann makes it clear that he is not a relativist. His perspective is similar to one developed by Karl Mannheim, called “relationism.” According to Mannheim, “Once we recognize that all historical knowledge is relational knowledge, and can only be formulated with reference to the position of the observer, we are faced, once more, with the task of discriminating between what is true and what is false in such knowledge. . . . Relationism does not assert that there are no criteria of rightness and wrongness in a discussion. It does insist, however, that it lies in the nature of certain assertions that they cannot be formulated absolutely, but only in terms of the perspective of a given situation.” (1949:70:254).
This implies more than that one harbors personal biases and is unable to engage in a truly value-free science. It means that in order to participate in the world of sociology, one must communicate as a sociologist. While communicating as a sociologist, one cannot communicate as a native—as a member of the group being “studied.” In other words, sociologists can only be sociologists; they cannot become “participant observers” or see the world as natives would. The sociologist can be a participant or an observer, but never both. The communication system used by the natives is different from that used by sociologists discussing research about the natives. When sociologists communicate with the natives, they are not sociologists.

Sociologists observe society from within a society—the society of sociologists. As we make meaning and communicate together, we depend on conversations that we had in the past. The more our social system evolves, the more different it becomes from other ways of communicating. Of all the things that we could discuss, we limit our horizon to the relevant subjects of the day. Areas of sociological inquiry, research agendas, methodologies, funding sources, and current debates are selected contingencies—they could be different. By reducing the complexity of the world, by distinguishing between what is sociological and what is not, the society of sociologists creates an environment in which individuals can understand one another. We know what “one” studies, how “one” writes reports, and how “one” performs at a professional conference. Sociologists do not study numismatics. They do not write poetry. They do not present the results of their research in graveyards. These things, of course, could all be done by sociologists. As a society, however, sociology becomes possible only after distinctions are made: This is sociological and that is not. The actual space of sociology is marked and everything else is left outside, in an “unmarked space” of potentialities (58).

Sociology, like any other social system, becomes a society at the expense of narrowing its field of vision. In this sense, Luhmann’s perspective is phenomenological. Consciousness is always intentional, it is always consciousness of something and not everything. It is consciousness of one thing at a time. Communication, in a similar manner, is always about something and not everything. In Luhmann’s theory, different societal systems are constructed to carry on conversations about different subjects. The economic system communicates about money, the value of goods and services, and methods of exchange. The political system communicates about power, elections, and what is required to remain in office. Each societal system is a functionally dedicated construction that reduces the complexity of its environment by narrowing its subject matter and differentiating itself from other societal systems.

II. THREE DIMENSIONS OF MEANING

In the core chapters of his book, Luhmann presents the three principal components of his general theory: communication, evolution, and differentiation. He states that the sequence of chapters was an arbitrary decision and that any one of the three components can serve as a reasonable entry into the general theory (1138). Every social system, he asserts, engages in autopoiesis to make meaningful distinctions in three separate dimensions, the social, temporal, and functional (Sozial-, Zeit-, and Sachdimensionen) (1136–8). Autopoiesis refers

4The work of Heidegger immediately comes to mind when Luhmann discusses the reducing power and anonymous weight of the social system upon the individual “man.” “The ‘who’ is not this one, not that one, not oneself, not some people, and not the sum of them all. The ‘who’ is the neuter, the ‘they’ [das Man] . . . In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the real dictatorship of the ‘they’ is unfolded . . . Distantiability, averageness, and levelling down, as ways of Being for the ‘they,’ constitute what we know as ‘publicness’ [die Öffentlichkeit]. Publicness proximally controls every way in which the world and Dasein get interpreted . . . because it is insensitive to difference of level and of genuineness and thus never gets to the ‘heart of the matter’” [auf die Sachen] (Heidegger 1962:164–165).
to the system’s ability to create itself in opposition to its environment. The system produces its own border, parts, and meaningful structures. “That is why autopoiesis is not to be understood as the production of a specific structure [Gestalt]. What is decisive is much more the creation of a difference between system and environment” (66).

Luhmann insists that the three dimensions of meaning cannot be interchanged, and that each dimension is meaningful only in combination with the other two. The functional dimension produces the difference between system and environment. The temporal dimension produces the difference between past and future. The social dimension produces the difference between Ego and Alter. Luhmann provides the following sketch to illustrate “the result” of his thinking (1138):

![Autopoiesis of Society Diagram](image)

Luhmann’s “relatively loose” theory design, as depicted above, results from the integration of “numerous theoretical decisions.” A social system emerges whenever communication begins and, as the result of autopoiesis, continues to build upon itself. “Communication is autopoietic in that it is created only in combination with other communications in a recursive manner; that is, only within a network that is reproduced by each particular communication” (82–3). Evolution occurs as structural couplings bridge the difference between the system and its environment. As the system performs its operations, categories of structural couplings increase in complexity and differentiation. Communication builds upon itself in the social, temporal, and functional dimensions of meaning. Self-description occurs when the social system stops its operations long enough to consider itself as a unit, giving itself a name and naming what it is not. Self-description involves the writing of a self-reflective narrative, an “autological” text that integrates distinctions made in the social, temporal, and functional dimensions (880).

**Communication and the Social Dimension.** The recursive process of autopoiesis results in communication, “a reality sui generis” (195). The reality of communication is “the only genuinely social phenomenon” (81), bridging the distance between individual people (systems of consciousness) and between other kinds of closed systems: “A person cannot communicate, only communication can communicate. . . . There is no communication between this consciousness and that consciousness that is not social. . . . Only a consciousness can think (but certainly not across into another consciousness), and only society can communicate” (105). Communication, from Luhmann’s point of view, occurs when Alter intentionally transmits information through a medium to Ego who understands it as anticipated (190: 1136–7).

Luhmann considers speech to be the most basic medium of communication, guaranteeing the continuing autopoiesis of society (205). “In an evolutionary context, speech is an extremely improbable kind of noise which, because of its improbability, is highly able to attract attention and lends itself to highly complex possibilities of specification (110).”
When specific forms of speech are differentiated from noise and given meaning in a social context, a language emerges that can function as a structural coupling between communicants. According to Luhmann,

Speech possesses its very own form. As a form with two sides it emerges from the difference between sound (Laut) and meaning (Sinn) . . . Spoken communication is the processing of meaning within the medium of sound. . . . In order to construct the difference between medium and form within speech itself, the medial substrate of speech, the difference between sound and meaning, must be underspecified. Without underspecification there would be nothing left to say because everything would already have been said. This problem is solved with the difference between words and sentences. Words are also constellations of sounds with meaning; but they do not determine the sentences that they can produce when combined. . . . With the help of speech, one may say something that has never been said before. (Italics in original, 213–5)

Speakers may creatively combine meaningful words and phrases to stretch the language, producing new words in an autopoietic, recursive manner.

Luhmann stresses that communication is not at all a natural or simple means by which Alter and Ego exchange meanings and coordinate their actions. Rather, communication is a highly “improbable” event that, most of the time, results in some degree of misunderstanding (190–1). Even if two “systems of consciousness” meet in the same place at the same time, it is not certain that they will be able to overcome their “double contingency” (332). They may not speak the same language. If Alter speaks Ego’s dialect, Ego may not be willing to chat. If Ego does reply, it may only be to tell Alter how much she disagrees with him. If Alter and Ego actually end up agreeing about an issue, they may not succeed in remembering what it was. If Alter and Ego manage to communicate today, nothing guarantees that they will ever meet again. In short, very many problems must be solved in order to build society.

According to Luhmann’s theory, there are two general kinds of communication media: disseminating media (Verbreitungsmedien) and success media (Erfolgsmedien). “Disseminating media determine and increase the number of recipients of a communication” (202). Speech, writing, television, and e-mail are examples of dissemination media; each can be used to pass along the same information among the members of a society. Such media are useful in small groups with a high frequency of face-to-face interaction, but they become increasingly problematic as the number of participants grows.

As a consequence of evolution and increased social differentiation, new types of communication media are institutionalized: success media. Success media are symbolically generalized media that convey meaning within a specific societal system. A specific binary code produces the meaningful form (difference) within each success medium (359). For instance, money is used in the economy (income/loss), grades are used in school (pass/fail), and power is used in politics (win/lose). As a “primitive” segmented society evolves into a functionally differentiated society, the recursive complexity and semantic differentiation of success media increases (205).

In the “Old-European” tradition, morality and ethics were thought to provide meaning throughout society. In a functionally differentiated society, however, morality is meaningless in the same way success is meaningless when applied outside of its own self-referential context. Luhmann writes:

In a modern society, in a society with fully developed symbolically generalized media, there is no supermedium capable of lending a uniform meaning to all com-
munications. Once again, one may think of morality (some say: ethics). Yet the attempt to cure all of the morally weak areas of society with ethics (with a moral reflection) borders on the ridiculous. (359)

The ability to make sense in society is determined by a specific structural context. For instance, what makes sense in politics (winning or losing an election) may not make money in the world of finance. What makes sense in school (passing or failing courses) may not produce a winning football team. Each societal system is a self-determined, autopoietic system operating according to its own binary distinctions (forms) and success media. To command a system is to obey it.

Communication and the Temporal Dimension. Making sense of the world would take an unbearably long time if each person had to come to terms with his or her environment alone. Communication between people helps speed up the process of gathering and sorting out information about one’s environment. Luhmann suggests that the evolution of human beings can be characterized by two simultaneous developments: “extreme social dependence and marked individuality” (193). Individual systems of consciousness do not come to directly depend on one another; rather, they come to depend on a higher order system: “For human beings this higher order system, that does not itself live, is the communication system of society” (194).

For Luhmann, the evolution of the social system is not a story about how society adapts to its environment. As time passes, a society evolves by adapting to itself—to its own internal structures. The evolution of society increases complexity, exhibiting “negentropy” (415). Luhmann rejects the optimistic notion of evolutionary progress and dismisses the idea that complex systems are inherently better than simple ones. The more complex a system, the more things can go wrong.

Social systems are certainly dependent on their environment for basic necessities (systems of consciousness need to eat, eyes need light, the shoe factory needs rubber, libraries need books, etc.). A system relies on a natural world and can certainly destroy that world to its own peril. Nonetheless, fundamental dependence on the environment does not determine the evolution of society. The direction of evolution results from a history of variation, selection, and restabilization within the realm of communication (427).

Socio-cultural evolution begins with the improbability of human survival. It is unlikely that isolated individuals or isolated families will survive, but it is even more unlikely that they will become structurally coordinated and provide mutual assistance (414). Surprisingly, they sometimes do. With his evolutionary theory, Luhmann intends to account for the improbability of negentropy. Within the dimension of time, societal systems coevolve by heaping communication upon communication, one bit after another. There are no natural laws that determine how meanings must be combined, there is no single creator, and there is no teleology. Autopoiesis, functioning in time, produces structures that, recursively, produce future structures.

Differentiation and the Functional Dimension. Though he does not think that modern society is structurally superior to earlier types of society, Luhmann presents a series of specific evolutionary social forms or stages. The differentiation of society results from increasing structural complexity. The evolving society does not necessarily follow an ascending linear path in one direction; it can easily collapse in on itself and return to a more primitive structure.

Luhmann analyzes historical societies according to their level of differentiation. In its elementary form, society is segmented. A segmented society is characterized by the functional uniformity of its parts: the form (meaning, value, usefulness) of one segment is the
same as the next. With increasing differentiation, the segmented society becomes stratified. In a stratified society, the social meaning of a person extends from the class, estate, or caste to which he belongs. As the stratified society grows in influence and develops enduring trade relationships with segmented societies, its form becomes the difference between center and periphery. The society at the center (Athens, Rome, London, etc.) is characterized by a stratification system, while the periphery remains segmented. Nonetheless, the structural ties that exist between the center and periphery facilitate communication. Finally, as the difference between center and periphery loses meaning due to assimilation and globalization, differentiation in society becomes functional. There is always only one “society of society,” but there is no single functional society: There is an economic society, a political society, a religious society, an educational society, a military society, etc. Each societal system works at its own task, but each employs communication. As it evolves through these four stages, society expands and contracts with the constantly changing flow of actual communication. With greater differentiation, there is more communication. The more communication, the larger society becomes.

In *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, Luhmann devotes most of his attention to analyzing the societal (functional) systems of modern society. Each societal system is autopoietic, has its own environment, and operates according to its own form and medium. Functional systems can only “understand” or use their own distinctions. A societal system, such as the economy, is highly specialized and cannot be replaced by another system. However, systems can “irritate” one another, possibly leading to the creation of operational and structural couplings between systems. One system may irritate another by observing a part of its activity and strategically interfering with its operations. Structural couplings emerge as a system struggles to find a way to cope with a recurring source of environmental irritation. An effective coupling communicates information about the environment in a self-referential manner.

Luhmann stands in stark contrast to sociologists who characterize contemporary society as alienating, anomic, and disintegrated. In fact, Luhmann suggests that contemporary society is at risk because it is “overintegrated.”

Modern society is over-integrated and thereby endangered. In the autopoiesis of its functional systems it has more than enough stability: anything goes that is compatible with this autopoiesis. At the same time, however, it can irritate itself more than any previous society. (618)

Systems lean too much upon one another. Even in the absence of any system-wide integrating force, the failure of one societal system can jeopardize the success of others. Whenever something happens in the world, Luhmann asserts, it happens many times (599). A single event may be observed by several different societal systems—and may be given just as many different meanings. Societal systems are contextual, but modern society is *polycontextural* (36). With this line of thought, Luhmann emphatically denies the value of traditional ontologies. Nothing exists outside of a context, and no single context can give universal meaning. In the functional dimension, the complexity of communication increases as societal systems differentiate.

III. SELF-DESCRIPTION AND MODERNITY

According to Luhmann’s constructivist perspective, knowledge about the world is gained by “observation.” The environment, however, gives no information; it does not speak about itself (613). When a system observes its environment, it does so self-referentially,
using its own distinctions and making sense of itself. To make an observation, a two-sided
distinction must be made: What is being observed must be separated from everything else
(1121). One cannot observe everything at once. In “Old-Europe,” certain distinctions gained
authority as Weltanschauungen. Deism, Historicism, Marxism, Positivism, and (paradox-
ically) Relativism were sold as “super-codes” that could give meaning to all reality. “The
European tradition of (rational) knowledge and action sought after final foundations, after
principles, after unquestionable maxims. If one wanted to continue the tradition, one would
have to deliver a self-description of society and assert: this is the right one” (1134). Luh-
mann argues that the era of superperspectives is over—they are inherently flawed because,
de spite what they observe, they are blind to everything else.

Luhmann suggests that sociological observations of society have erroneously adopted
morality as a supercode. With Parsons and American “critical theorists” in mind, Luhmann
writes:

To an astonishing degree and more than all others, American sociology has posi-
tioned itself to stand up for the Good and to accept the Bad, at best, as a form of
“deviance” that should be the target of social reform efforts. It perfectly copies the
classic story of American movies: the Good has a terrible time, it almost fails against
its adversaries; but in the end it triumphs against all odds, drives off in a shiny new
car and gets a well-earned kiss. (1130)

During the Twentieth Century, sociology established itself as a “science of crises.” As a
consequence, it has become trapped in its own theory crisis (1132). Our research agenda is
second to our adopted moral agenda, which is meaningless within the system of science.
As a result, nothing that sociology observes means much to anyone. Just like a movie,
sociology might be a nice story, but it is not real.

Instead of offering a moralistic, sociological supercode to the rest of the world, sociol-
ognists should concentrate on learning how to observe society observing itself. That is,
sociology should learn how to describe the multiple ways in which social systems describe
themselves. “The logic of observation and description must be switched over from mono-
contextual to polycrhythmic structures. It can no longer use only one single distinction to
highlight one aspect of a thing, only to let everything else fall away” (1094). It must be
emphasized that Luhmann is not claiming that one observation is just as “true” as another
is. He is not saying that multiple self-descriptions produce multiple societies. There is,
indeed, only one society (1141). Social systems are bound by their own, self-determined
structures. Each one is bound by itself and no other. Every kind of communication, what-
ever its form and medium, is society.

Self-description in modern society is, inherently, open-ended and polycrhythmic. Soci-
ology, as the science of society, is communication about how different societal systems
operate, communicate, evolve, and maintain their boundaries. As in all other social sys-
tems, the self-description of sociology is autological and self-referential. Using the abstract
concepts of system theory, sociologists can clarify the forms (distinctions) and media used
by particular systems. The focus of sociology should be to compare and contrast systems,
to relate understanding to form, and to relate form to context.

Luhmann desires to play with sociology. He wants to hop from one place to another,
asking: What can one see from this perspective? What can one not see? What would one
see if one moved over there? What would one not see? How does another viewer see it?
Can another tell me how he sees it? What does she see that she is not telling? By playfully
engaging in sociology as a self-description, the communication of sociologists might actu-
ally irritate other systems enough to earn the discipline the reputation it deserves.
IV. CONCLUSION

Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft offers a turning point for sociology. It invites a radical break from the past. The value of system theory lies in both what it has and what it does not have. It has structural form without specific content. Without a supercode, essentialist ontology, or moral mission, system theory provides explanatory concepts that are abstract enough to be applied to all social systems. The distinctions of social system theory can be universal because they are without universal content. By not imposing content on its forms, the sociological perspective opens itself to the world. Sociological communication can be used to describe any society because “its distinction makes no distinction” (90).

Communication is an emergent reality sui generis. The history of communication produces undeniable structure in a recursive, autopoietic manner. “Everything that is experienced as reality,” writes Luhmann, “comes out of the resistance of communication to communication” (95). Bit by bit, building only upon what came before, communication produces society. Modern society expands and contracts as societal systems communicate. Society does not depend on the lives of individual human beings; it does not require moral consensus or common understanding. Territorial borders do not contain it, and it cannot be experienced outside of itself. The society of society is communication, the only structure that exists between people.

With his grand finale, Luhmann hopes to provoke sociologists into asking the right kinds of questions. He is not offering a Grand Narrative, but he is presenting a grand social theory, with a claim to universal validity. Enlightened sociology possesses its own concepts and has its own agenda. It is open to the complexity of world society. “The point is only to show what one can construct and how far sensitivities let themselves unfold when one starts from here and not there. The goal is to make criticism easier and more difficult. You do it differently, that is the challenge, but do it at least as well” (1095;1133).

REFERENCES