

Complexiteit en contingentie : een kritische inleiding tot de sociologie van Niklas Luhmann

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SUMMARY

Complexity and Contingency — a Critical Introduction to the Sociology of Niklas Luhmann (T. Blom)

This thesis is an introduction to and a critical survey of the sociology of Niklas Luhmann, with an emphasis on its basic tenets and the theory of (modern) society based upon it.

Any thorough study of Luhmann's theoretical endeavours requires an account of the *general systems theory* that has formed their encompassing framework. Therefore the first chapter opens with a survey of its presuppositions and startingpoints. Actually, considering the fact that through the years the general systemstheoretical lay-out of Luhmann's enterprise has developed and changed, it is more accurate to speak of the systems theories which have served as the successive frameworks of Luhmannian sociology. In reconstructing this development, the focus will first be on a decisive change, which Luhmann himself considers to be a real 'paradigm-switch', viz. the transition from (a specific version of) the theory of 'open systems' to the theory of 'autopoietic', or 'selfreferential systems'. This transition has provided Luhmann with the 'logical' instruments and theoretical models enabling him to conceive of 'the social' as a free-floating, self-sustaining, dynamic reality. In the wake of this paradigm-change a specific tenet, viz. the *theory of 'observation'*, has become of major importance, ultimately occupying a central place in the theoretical edifice. As a result, Luhmann's more recent work is to be considered a particular application or instance of the so-called 'second order'-cybernetics, essentially a theory of the observation of observing systems, with radical constructivistic implications. At the same time this rather 'natural', if not obvious, merging of the theory of selfreferential systems with a constructivist theory of observation, poses a serious problem. As it turns out, one of the most central concepts of Luhmann's entire enterprise, the concept of 'complexity', does not fit in with these more recent theoretical developments, at least not as they are defined and dealt with by Luhmann so far. Following up a critical discussion of this problem an adjusted concept of 'complexity' is suggested.

After an exploration of the general systemstheoretical premisses of Luhmann's, the next three chapters turn to those categories that, in order to establish a systemstheoretical *sociology*, should bring about a sociological (re)specification of the general startingpoints and models involved. Special attention is paid to the concept of 'meaning' ('Sinn'). Within the context of a Luhmannian sociology, it is *meaning* which figures as a, if not the fundamental category ('Grundbegriff'); moreover it gives Luhmann's work a very distinctive quality, unexpectedly blending phenomenological (Husserl) and hermeneutic motives with an originally non-intentionalistic, anti-individualistic or 'structural' approach. This 'blend' or synthesis is arrived at by a radical functionalist interpreta-

tion of 'meaning' as a special and highly potential mode of reducing complexity. Notwithstanding this functionalism and the anti-intentionalistic/anti-psychological flavour that pervades all his work, Luhmann's sociology is and remains a sociology based on 'meaning', a sociology that is which takes 'meaning' as the inevitable medium of all interaction and social structure. It is, in effect, a sociology designed for the empirical study of structures of meaning ('Semantiken'), considered as the always historical and variable means by which societies organise and structure themselves.

Following the chapter dedicated to Luhmann's concept of meaning, all those principles and concepts — e.g. 'double contingency', 'reflexivity', 'reflexion', 'communication', 'social system', 'structure', 'cognition', 'norm', 'action', 'conflict', etc. — are explored which, together with 'meaning', form the categorical system of his sociology proper. First the crucial function is shown of Luhmann's concept of 'communication' in the sociological translation and specification of general, systemstheoretical models. It is explained in which sense the interpretation of 'communication' or 'communicationprocesses' as the substance of social systems leads to a picture of social systems as autopoietic/selfreferential systems, i.e. as *radically temporalized systems which produce and reproduce the elements (events called 'communications') they consist of, by and out of the elements they consist of*. This sociological translation and reconstruction of the theory of selfreferential systems forms the basis of Luhmann's claim to have developed a sociology which is neither individualistic nor collectivistic. To put it differently, Luhmann's sociology does not lean on subjectivist or objectivist reductions; instead it stresses the *self-structuring* capacities as well as the *self-destabilizing* capacities of social systems, taking the ordered reproduction of dis-order for a normal and inevitable feature of social processes. Against this background and still at the abstract level of the foundation of a 'grand theory' the adjoining chapter considers some consequences and extensions of this, already rather complex theoretical fabric, e.g. Luhmann's theory of conflict, his re-interpretation of teleological, instrumental action and some cultural-diagnostic implications of his distinction between 'normatively' and 'cognitively' styled social structures.

Although whenever possible Luhmann's program is compared with the suggestions and aspirations of other theoretical sociologists, the main thrust of the critical and evaluative sections of these chapters is a defense of Luhmann's positions against attacks inspired by a typical consequence of his approach, viz. the decision to regard humans/individuals/psychic systems as systems in the environment of social systems and *not* as elements of the social systems themselves.

After the general groundwork of his sociology has been exposed, the chapters V and VI concentrate on Luhmann's theory of society, particularly his theory of modern society. For Luhmann a theory of society (again) has to function as a general framework in its own right, giving theoretical hold to, and at the same time methodically integrating, empirical research on the level of sociological subdisciplines, such as the sociology of religion, of art, of law, etc. The general

assumptions and organising principles of Luhmann's theory of society are described in the first of the two chapters dedicated to this subject. Besides a short glance at Luhmann's theory of (face-to-face) interaction and his sociology of organisations, this survey includes the concept of 'society' as such, the theory of societal evolution and its principles, the concept of 'symbolically generalised media of communication' and Luhmann's rather specific model of functional differentiation as a 'code'-based phenomenon.

The following, 'complementary' chapter VI focusses more specifically on Luhmann's diagnosis of modern, Western society. First it is shown that (and why) Luhmann's general model of functional differentiation implies a rather pessimistic picture of modern society. In Luhmann's view modern society is unable to counter the threat that originates in the form of complexity this type of society has taken on, a danger that can be summarised as the growing opposition between the highly developed potentials and specialized rationalities of the societal subsystems on the one hand and the ever-increasing irrationality and unmanageable drift of modern society taken as a whole on the other. Next, two more specific issues are discussed, viz. the problem how the political system can control other societal subsystems and the problem of an empirical identification/delimitation of functionally differentiated subsystems. As an outcome of these discussions two, rather serious objections are formulated: 1) Within his towering theoretical edifice there is a remarkable gap between the theory of organisations and the theory of modern society/modernisation, not only foreclosing a systematic analysis of the 'modernity' of formal organization and its function within a functionally differentiated society, but also leading to an unnecessarily sceptic/pessimistic outlook on how the modern state can exercise control 2) The problems regarding the empirical delimitation of societal subsystems stem from an untenable interpretation of the process of functional differentiation as a code-based differentiation of society into social systems, the later being defined as structured processes of communication or action. It is argued that the model of 'coding' (and 'programming') can only lead to the assumption that functional differentiation takes the form of a differentiation of 'provinces of meaning' (Schutz). This leads us back to and strengthens a conjecture raised in the preceding chapter, that, as it is, Luhmann's concept of 'society' cannot stand the test of criticism.

The final chapter of this book confronts one of the most puzzling questions posed by any comprehensive reading of Luhmann's work, viz. the question concerning the normative, if not 'political' commitment of his sociology. Taking Luhmann's concept of 'sociological Enlightenment' as a key, it is argued that the normative commitment of the Luhmannian project lays hidden in the 'demoralisation of deviancy' inherent to it. Luhmann's sociology is 'political' to the extent that it calls to attention that in our modern, highly complex society the problem of deviancy lurks, among other things, in the problem of possibly insufficient deviancy. This normative stance is closely linked up with a specific idea of what constitutes 'sociological Reason' (or: a rational-reasonable

sociology). To sum up the outcome of this reconstruction of the underlying concept of 'Reason': Reasonable is any sociology that is able to distinguish the circular, self-founding unity of epistemological normativity and theory-loaded description from the self-constructed reality as the reality it wishes to describe cognitively.

Viewed from a distance, and in terms of the history of Ideas, this concept of rationality, and in fact the whole idea of a 'sociological Enlightenment', is tributary to, if not rooted in, Romantic philosophy. Essentially Luhmann's sociology is a secularized, sociological Romanticism (Fritscher). Or to paraphrase Adorno's famous dictum: Luhmann! — that is 'halbierte Romantik', Romanticism that has abandoned all 'Sehnsucht', but clings to irony as an indispensable source of travesty, as a method of showing the improbability of the propable.