



# Theory of society and cultural sociology. Niklas Luhmann and after

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## Abstract

While not particularly popular or well-known in anglophone sociology or even cultural sociology, there seems to be a renaissance of Luhmann's work. This essay discusses three recent books on and from Luhmann, which cover the famous Habermas–Luhmann debate, give us a taste of what can be called Luhmann's empirical cultural sociology and, finally, discuss his theory of society. I will place these books in the context of contemporary cultural sociology, with a focus on the strong program and civil sphere theory. There are a few things that cultural sociologists can learn from Luhmann's work as well as from works on Luhmann—without having to become disciples ourselves. This includes also more general lessons about theorizing and how we should incorporate insights from other theoretical frameworks. I advocate a pragmatic and eclectic approach to Luhmann's work, which needs to be rescued from the hands of his most orthodox followers. Finally, I urge my fellow cultural sociologists to follow Luhmann in his ambition to develop a fully-fledged theory of society. The last years have shown that a truly cultural sociology is possible—maybe the next years will show that a cultural sociological theory of society is possible too.

**Keywords** Niklas Luhmann · Cultural sociology · Theory of society · Meaning · Civil sphere

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**Reviewed books** Gorm Harste: *The Habermas–Luhmann Debate* (2021). New York: Columbia University Press; Niklas Luhmann (2022): *The Making of Meaning. From the Individual to Social Order. Selections from Niklas Luhmann’s Works on Semantics and Social Structure*. Edited by Christian Morgner, translated by Margaret Hiley, Christian Morgner and Michael King. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press; Rolf Rogowski (ed., 2023): *Anthem Companion to Niklas Luhmann*. London; New York: Anthem Press.

## Introduction

Niklas Luhmann’s influence on German sociology can hardly be overestimated. His work was a constant point of reference and source of inspiration for the generation of my academic teachers and for us, their students. As an undergraduate at the University of Mannheim, I read Luhmann’s *Soziale Systeme* (which was not part of the curriculum) over the course of a year and it proved to be a potent antidote against the rational choice theorists at our department (who themselves teamed up with Luhmann on occasion, for example when criticizing the idealism of Habermas). While I never became a follower of Luhmann, turning towards cultural sociology as a graduate student, his thinking has shaped me profoundly.

Luhmann himself showed little interest in school building and even actively resisted attempts “of his disciples to create a Luhmann school (but could not avoid its self-organization)” (Teubner in Rogowski, p. 180). While groups of devoted Luhmann followers (or Luhmaniacs, as I like to call them) still exist, his broader influence in Germany has been more subtle, extending even to those that explicitly refused his theory. Through Luhmann, concepts such as “functional differentiation” and “second-order observation” entered common sociological parlance and debates about the relation between “social theory” and “theory of society” would not have taken place without him. Luhmann’s influence extended far beyond sociological circles and even academia itself. In the early 2000s, (often implicit) references to his work could be found all over the place, not only in scholarly works, but also in political and journalistic articles. Luhmann’s sociology suited the neoliberal zeitgeist at the time, but his oeuvre continues to cast a shadow over intellectual discourses in Germany.

Luhmann’s influence was not limited to the German-speaking world. He became popular in Japan, Scandinavia, Italy, Spain as well as Latin America. His standing in the anglophone sociological community has always been more precarious. According to Luhmann, society is defined by the limits of understandable communication. While the vast majority of Luhmann’s works have remained untranslated into English, there is now a broad selection of translated books available in addition to the articles originally written and published in English. In his introduction to *The Anthem Companion on Niklas Luhmann*, to be discussed later, Ralf Rogowski lists eighteen English-language volumes, not including the recent collection *The Making of Meaning* also reviewed in this essay. Surely, that



is more than enough material to keep oneself busy for a couple of years and get a solid grasp of Luhmann's theory.

Language does not seem to be the problem, at least not the German language. Instead, it might be the idiosyncratic theory language of the author, which makes it difficult for readers to distinguish between utterance and information—according to Luhmann a precondition for understanding and communication. One first needs to master the code of Luhmann's language to render his writings intelligible. He himself linked his complex writing style to the complexity of modern society, but it might also be related to the fact that Luhmann was not socialized into sociology as a discipline. After studying law, he first worked as a civil servant in public administration. In 1960, he received a scholarship that allowed him to spend a year at Harvard University, where he met and studied with Parsons and transformed the latter's structural functionalism into a more dynamic functional structuralism. From 1962 onward, he occupied various academic posts in Germany before becoming a professor for sociology in Bielefeld in 1968. Luhmann remained for most part a self-trained sociologist, which allowed him to develop a remarkably independent conception of society. Viewed through the lenses of his own theory, Luhmann's theorizing can be described as an improbable form of communication, which against all odds became probable and understandable, at least in certain institutional settings.

A crucial role in Luhmann's rise to (national) fame played the Luhmann–Habermas debate, which is discussed by Gorm Harste in a recently published monograph reviewed here. In Germany, Luhmann's performance in the debate swayed many young minds, who were initially supportive of Habermas' position, and turned Habermas himself into an acute observer of Luhmann. In the years that followed, the Luhmannian discourse reached a critical mass, in Germany and other countries, which allowed it to stabilize and become a formative intellectual experience for many sociologists. Why did this not happen in the United States? One possible reason could be that the Habermas–Luhmann debate was never published in English—allegedly because Habermas refused its translation and publication. Another reason might be the tendency of the anglophone scholarly discourse to attribute the complexity of writing to its author ('bad writing') and not to its subject (as Luhmann would have it). More importantly, however, Luhmann's reception in the United States was impeded by the backlash against the Parsonian structural functionalism, which was still held in high esteem in Germany (and elsewhere) well into the 1980s.

Nowadays, Luhmann's star seems to be fading in Germany. Younger scholars are more interested in the works of Bruno Latour, which may fulfill a similar intellectual function. Latour offers a bold theory with its own intricate terminology claiming to reinvent sociology while doing away with what Luhmann dismissively called the "old-European tradition". Meanwhile in anglophone sociology, there seems to be a renaissance of Luhmann's thought, indicated by the three books discussed below: Gorm Harste's *The Luhmann–Habermas Debate*, which also covers the back-story and aftermath of the debate; *The Making of Meaning* edited by Christian Morgner, which makes parts of Luhmann's empirical cultural sociology accessible to an anglophone audience; and, finally, the *Anthem*



*Companion to Niklas Luhmann*, which assembles contributions from some of the world's most renowned Luhmann scholars.

In the following, I will discuss these books in the context of cultural sociology, in particular in relation to the strong program (Alexander and Smith 2003/2001), with which Luhmann's theory shares quite a few characteristics. If one digs deeper, however, things get complicated. While Luhmann might offer a cultural sociology of sorts, its status as a strong program is at best ambivalent. Nonetheless, there are a few things that cultural sociologists can learn from Luhmann's work as well as from works on Luhmann—without having to become disciples ourselves.

## The Habermas–Luhmann debate

A good starting point to familiarize oneself with the work and importance of Luhmann is Gorm Harste's book *The Habermas–Luhmann Debate*, which covers not only the famous debate itself, but also the trajectory of its participants leading up to it as well as their subsequent intellectual development and continuous engagement with each other's work. Harste, a Danish scholar with an intimate knowledge of both oeuvres and a weak spot for grand theory, is well-positioned to offer an account of the lifelong dispute between both authors. In German sociology, it is widely believed that the mutual influence of its protagonists was rather one-sided. The German media theorist Bolz (2012, p. 66) once even claimed that while Habermas learned a lot from Luhmann, there was very little that Luhmann could learn and, in fact, did learn from Habermas. While largely confirming this narrative, Harste offers an important corrective, suggesting that the communicative turn of Luhmann in the 1970s was a direct consequence of his encounter with Habermas, who already back then advocated the centrality of communicative action. Harste reconstructs the evolving relationship between both thinkers in a chronological fashion; yet he treats no moment in isolation, but as a development of earlier and anticipation of later thoughts. While this back-and-forth does not make for an easy reading, it constantly reminds the reader of the 'bigger picture'. Furthermore, the author addresses important terminological and theoretical changes, while also rendering earlier and lesser-known texts in terms of their better-known mature theories, which makes it easier to follow the development of arguments on both sides.

In the introduction and the first chapter of the book, Harste offers an overview and some historical context of the debate, including the biographical and intellectual trajectory of both participants. While Luhmann and Habermas were both interested in developing a general theory of modern society, their theorizing was undoubtedly shaped by their shared experience of Nazi totalitarianism and German postwar society. In his introduction, Harste stresses the meta-theoretical character and stakes of the debate: its protagonists not only strive for consensus and articulate their disagreements; in doing so, they discuss the role of communication, agreement and dissent in modern society. While both agree on the central role of communication, Luhmann sees disagreements as the driver of



communication and societal evolution, while for Habermas consensus as counterfactual telos drives communication and, consequently, society.

The next two chapters in Harste's book explore the debate itself, respectively the coauthored book that came out of it (Habermas and Luhmann 1971): it starts with two chapters by Luhmann, an exposition of his systems theory and of his theory of meaning, followed by a chapter on the pragmatics of communicative situations by Habermas; the fourth chapter is a 160-page long critique of Luhmann's approach by Habermas, while the fifth chapter concludes the book with a 100-page rebuke of Luhmann. Of particular interest for cultural sociologists is the second chapter by Luhmann on "Meaning as Sociology's Basic Concept", which is the only contribution to the debate that has been translated and published in English (1990). Gorm discusses the essay in a few pages (pp. 58–62), using empirical examples such as the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 to illustrate some of Luhmann's concepts. As a cultural sociologist, I would have appreciated a deeper discussion of Luhmann's conception of meaning, which builds upon Husserl, but the focus of the Harste's book is clearly the theory of society of Luhmann and Habermas, in particular questions concerning democracy and legitimacy. He primarily discusses the last two chapters of the book, where the authors directly engage with one another on topics such as "ideology", "truth", "intersubjectivity", "universality" and "rationality".

According to Harste, Habermas's critique of Luhmann is plagued by severe misunderstandings, which create the impression that Habermas sculpted "with some effort and artifice [...] Luhmann into a straw man [...] he needed in order to develop his own position" (p. 103f.). Habermas characterizes Luhmann's decision theory as "decisionism", associating him with the polluted Nazi thinker Carl Schmitt, and incorrectly describes his conception of systems theory in terms of an "input–output" model, as a way to plan, control and steer society. While I don't think that the link between Luhmann and Schmitt is completely unwarranted, I concur with Harste that Habermas's caricature of Luhmann's systems theory couldn't be farther from the truth—something Habermas himself seemed to have acknowledged two decades later. For Luhmann, systems are self-steering and operate independently of each other, which not only means that they are beyond human control, but also that their complex interplay exacerbates the uncontrollability of modern society as a whole. According to Harste, the main difference between both authors lies in their treatment of temporality: Luhmann roots intersubjectivity in temporal copresence and highlights the time pressure to come to a decision on the basis of past decisions and in anticipation of the future. Habermas, instead, views intersubjectivity as a dialogue striving for consensus, even if time constraints or domination do not allow for its emergence.

Chapter four and five in Harste's book address the topics "history" and "evolution", first in the actual debate and then in the subsequent development of Luhmann's and Habermas's theories. Ironically, it is Luhmann who describes the history of modern society as a contingent and unplanned evolution, eventually resulting in something as improbable as a functionally differentiated society. Habermas, on the other hand, proposes a three-stage model of social evolution while at the same time warning against "grand totalizing narratives" (p. 162). Towards the end of the fourth



chapter, Harste briefly discusses Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* as a "comment on the Habermas–Luhmann debate about narratives of history and evolution" (p. 164), rendering the very concept of "postmodernity" an outcome of the debate (cf. also p. 202). Chapter five follows the theme into the 1980s, tracing the theoretical developments of both authors and their comments on each other's work. It is mainly chronology, which holds the diversity of texts discussed together, despite the author's efforts to weave a thematic thread through the material.

Throughout the chapters six to eight, Harste follows the authors into the 1990s, up until Luhmann's death, with a thematic focus on questions of democracy, legitimacy, politics and law. Luhmann defends the formal rationality of organizations and functional subsystems against the more substantive account of rationality through deliberation advocated by Habermas. In his theory of politics, for example, Luhmann stresses the importance of the code government/opposition, arguing that it is crucial for a democracy that the opposition is able to become the future government and vice versa (p. 226). For Habermas, true democracy can only be realized through deliberation in politics and public debates. While Luhmann's minimalist conception of democracy is hardly satisfying, I believe that the illiberal turn in countries like Hungary and the controversies surrounding the US election in 2020 have strengthened his argument. We might disagree about the rationality and legitimacy of decisions made by governments, but as long as they can be voted out of office things are not as bad as they could be. In chapter 7, Harst uses the concepts of "crisis" and "risk" to illuminate the difference between Habermas' and Luhmann's conception of society and politics. For Luhmann, the political system is only one of many functional systems (e.g., the economy), which operate autonomously and inevitably produce risks for society (e.g., ecological risks such as climate change). For Habermas, politics continues to play a central role in modern society, which means that any kind of crisis in another functional system (e.g., COVID in the health system) can become a rationality crisis or even legitimization crisis for the political system.

In chapter eight, Harste discusses how, towards the end of the 1980s, Habermas moved closer towards Luhmann's position, recognizing the relative autonomy of societal subsystems, the "steering problem" and the importance of formal or procedural rationality. Habermas was able to integrate certain aspects of Luhmann's theory without compromising on his original vision, providing a more refined and accurate account of deliberative democracy, in which law, politics and the public sphere are bound by their own logic. The questions of democracy and legitimacy debated by Luhmann and Habermas should be of great interest for cultural sociologists invested in civil sphere theory (Alexander 2006). Civil sphere theory shares the analytical concern of Luhmann's theory, while at the same time siding with Habermas in its conceptualization of the civil sphere as (sacred) center of society with—albeit limited—steering capability. The civil sphere achieves its autonomy through a binary code like the autopoietic systems of Luhmann, while at the same time not positing their clear-cut separation (e.g., by incorporating political and legal elements as regulative institutions). What distinguishes civil sphere theory from both Luhmann and Habermas is its rejection of any uncultural notion of rationality, whether formal or substantial—instead, rationality is deconstructed and reconstructed as an effect of symbols, rituals, performances and narratives. Harste does not mention



civil sphere theory, but his account of the Habermas–Luhmann debate provides an entry point for readers interested in these matters.

The last chapter of the book, followed by an epilogue, situates the debate in a “broader perspective”, contrasting the German theorists Luhmann and Habermas with their French contemporaries Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu. Despite the fact that these authors knew of each other, there was very little communication across the Rhine. Harste stresses their common concern with communication, while also pointing out that the French thinkers had “stronger analytics of power” than their German counterparts (p. 345). The epilogue starts with a promising reflection on the COVID-19 pandemic as a systemic risk and political crisis of world society, but quickly turns into a lengthy discussion of Habermas’ recent magnum opus, which Harste reads as a prolonged engagement with Luhmann, more than 20 years after the latter’s death. For me, this was rather disappointing, but also symptomatic of the whole book, which would have profited from less exegesis and a more systematic application of Habermas’ and Luhmann’s theories to contemporary phenomena and debates (e.g., climate change, populism, COVID, EU etc.).

In sum, the book offers a cursory yet useful introduction to Luhmann’s thought and work, especially for those who are already somewhat familiar with Habermas. At the beginning, I enjoyed the book tremendously, but the further I progressed, I increasingly became dissatisfied with the rather abstract and often messy discussion of texts and commentaries. I would have preferred a more selective and conceptual approach, focusing on the major points of the debate—ideally in the context of contemporary problems and discussions. Reconstructing and reviving the debate between these two intellectual giants is a Herculean task, which Harste did not solve—at least not to my satisfaction.

That being said, Harste offers an insight into *how* to engage with Luhmann. Luhmann’s program was one of observing and understanding modern society, whereas Habermas’ project was ultimately about participating in and transforming modern society (p. 75)—this casts Habermas in the role of the Marx, identifying the former with Hegel (p. 351), a role that Luhmann (1995/1984, p. 488) consciously embraced with his reference to the “owl of Minerva” at the end of *Social Systems*. While Habermas became an acute observer of Luhmann’s theory, he nonetheless remained committed to his goal of changing society for the better. All in all, I am more impressed by Habermas’ willingness to learn from and engage with Luhmann than by the latter’s supposed inability to learn from Habermas. Maybe we too should become observers of Luhmann—without necessarily abandoning our theoretical and normative presuppositions.

## Luhmann and the making of meaning

*The Making of Meaning*, edited by Christian Morgner, assembles five newly translated essays from the four volumes on *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik* (1980–1995) and its posthumously published continuation *Ideenevolution* (2008). Luhmann’s disciple Dirk Baecker described *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik* as his master’s “empirically and historically most important contribution to cultural



sociology” (in Rogowski, p. 134)—and bemoaned the lack of an English translation. Luhmann himself framed the series as a contribution to the sociology of knowledge, which can be partially explained by the late institutionalization of German cultural sociology in the 1980s, though more important might have been Luhmann’s reservations about the very concept of “culture”. In the essay selected from *Ideenevolution*, Luhmann advocates the use of “culture as historical concept” (in Morgner, pp. 300–319)—and not as a basic concept. Instead, he employs the term “semantics” in distinction to “social structure”. The latter is a translation of “Gesellschaftsstruktur” (literally: societal structure) in the German title, which is distinct from “Sozialstruktur”, a term that commonly refers to demographics such as gender, age or class. For Luhmann, and this is the central argument of the third essay (in Morgner, pp. 155–216), “class” is a primarily a semantic used by society to describe itself and not a structural feature of modern society. Instead, social (or societal) structure refers to the primary type of differentiation in a society, which can be either segmentary, stratified or functional-differentiated. Thus, it is commendable that the editor introduces these vital concepts (pp. 16–19) along with a fourth type of differentiation (center-periphery) which appears in the last version of Luhmann’s theory.

In his introduction, Morgner is at pains to detach the label “systems theory” from Luhmann’s work, re-framing him as an early cultural sociologist, who advocated meaning as basic concept “when it was not central to the sociology of the time” (p. 4). Considering that it is hard to deny that Luhmann was, among other things, also a systems theorist, Morgner’s considerable effort to dissociate the two attests to the fact that “systems theory” has become a polluted signifier in the socio-logical discourse—and, conversely, “cultural sociology” a sacred endeavor of sorts. Morgner specifically addresses cultural sociologists among the readers:

Those conducting these recent inquiries might be surprised to learn that Luhmann was asking questions about the relationship between ‘culture’ and societal structure almost thirty years earlier. (p. 5)

Yet, while Morgner mentions the strong program and other contemporary approaches in cultural sociology, he does not engage with them in any meaningful way. This makes it difficult to evaluate Luhmann’s position vis-à-vis and genuine contribution to the contemporary discourse. For example, Luhmann’s distinction between semantics and societal structure does indeed mirror in many respects the opposition between culture and social structure in the “strong program” (Alexander and Smith 2003/2001), including questions of autonomy and causality. If we take a closer look, however, important differences start to show. While there is a longstanding debate among Luhmann scholars about the specific relation between semantics and social structure, Luhmann himself left little doubt that the autonomy of semantics is fundamentally limited by social (or societal) structure. Following Alexander and Smith (2003/2001), we would thus have to describe Luhmann’s theory as a “weak program”, a “sociology of culture” rather than a “cultural sociology”. Morgner’s description of Luhmann’s analytical strategy seems to confirm this: “he interprets changes in meaning in terms of the transitions from a largely stratified society to a functionally differentiated society” (p. 19). If we take semantics as “meaning” and oppose societal structure as something non-meaningful, Luhmann becomes a





reductionist, explaining meaning through non-meaning. However, this equation is in itself problematic. In Luhmann's theory, societal structures are ultimately meaning-based and functional differentiation has to be understood as a "differentiation of meaning" (pp. 16–19) on the basis of binary codes. So, perhaps, Luhmann is not a reductionist after all, rooting surface semantics in a deeper conception of meaning. Yet, if everything is meaningful, does it even make sense to speak of an autonomy of culture without a noncultural counterpart? It's complicated.

Fittingly, Luhmann's first essay in the book, "Social Structure and Semantic Tradition", elucidates both concepts and their relation to each other, aiming to develop an alternative to Mannheim's sociology of knowledge. For Luhmann, semantics are based on meaningful experiences in everyday life, but transcend situational meaning-making by virtue of being generalized "forms" or patterns of meaning: "Accordingly, we understand by the term 'semantics' a meaning that is generalized on a higher level and that is available relatively independently of any given situation" (p. 37). This conception is in line with a strong understanding of cultural sociology that not only stresses the importance of meaning-making but also the existence of trans-situational meaning structures. For the purposes of his empirical research program, however, Luhmann restricts the concept of semantics further, singling out " 'cultured' semantics", which refers to "serious communication worthy of preservation" (p. 37). This move—reminiscent of Foucault—excludes broader public discourses and popular culture, which have been among the most productive fields of contemporary cultural sociological inquiry.

Social structure, on the other hand, is defined by Luhmann in terms of "system differentiation". A third term, "complexity", is introduced as "*intervening* variable [...] that mediates between the structural changes and semantic transformations set in motion by evolution" (p. 40). Both, semantics and social structure are constantly "adapting [...] in reaction" to changes in complexity, which suggests that the latter is not only an 'intervening' but independent variable. So, perhaps, "complexity" is the determining society in last instance? Not quite. In contrast to semantics, which Luhmann conceptualizes as rather passive, "the complexity which a society is able to achieve depends on the *form* of its differentiation" (p. 40). Thus, shifts in the "*primary* differentiation" of a society, allowing for higher degrees of complexity, become drivers of semantic change.

Luhmann's theoretical presuppositions not only lead to an asymmetry between semantics and social structure, which puts the autonomy of culture into question, but also limits the empirical scope of his historical cultural sociology: it only accounts for semantic changes as the consequence of transformations in the primary differentiation of a society. Due to the limited availability of 'cultured' semantics documenting the change from segmentary to stratificatory differentiation, Luhmann is foremost concerned with "the transitions from a largely stratified society to a functionally differentiated society" (p. 19), which took place in Europe primarily during the eighteenth century. Thus, Luhmann's empirical cultural sociological research, a form of historical discourse analysis, is able to tell us a lot about the semantic changes triggered by the birth of modernity, characterized by functional differentiation, but has little to say about discursive shifts within modern society. Luhmann concludes the essay with a self-referential move, applying his analytical framework



to Mannheim's sociology of knowledge and his own systems theory: both are only possible under the social conditions of functional differentiation, while only the latter is able to do justice to the complexity of contemporary society.

In the second essay, "How Is Social Order Possible?", Luhmann focuses primarily on semantic changes in the scientific system and the emergence of sociology as a subsystem. "How is social order possible?" is paradoxical question, designating at the same time "a problem that has already been solved" and an "unsolvable problem" (p. 91). As such it provides a foundation for sociology as a discipline, enabling its autonomy as well as universality. Luhmann discusses different solutions in the history of philosophy and sociology, culminating "in the theorem of 'double contingency'" by Parsons (p. 143), which serves as the starting point for his own reformulation of the problem. His essay does not offer an alternative solution but concerns the transcendental form of the question, which becomes only possible in a functionally differentiated society: "It is in the process of differentiation that we seek these conditions making possible the possibility of the question of the conditions of possibility" (p. 149). The universalizing semantic of the question "How is society possible?" only emerges under particular historical conditions, which does not invalidate its universality: "*Universalisms correlate with nonuniversal social developments*" (p. 150). Luhmann concludes the essay with three plausible answers to the question "How is social order possible?", one of them being "Through meaning" (p. 164). When Luhmann (1995/1984, pp. 103–136) later developed his own solution to the problem, the systems theorist came out on top of the cultural sociologist. Dismissing Parson's conception of a "shared symbolic system" in favor of the cybernetic "order from noise" principle, explaining the emergence of social order as a stabilization of random selections, Luhmann opted for a solution that downplayed the role of social meanings.

In the third essay, Luhmann investigates the concept of "class"—not as a social structure but as a semantic accompanying "the transition from stratificatory to functional differentiation" (p. 204). With the "unity of modern society" being based on "the difference of its function systems" (p. 213) rather than class differences, contemporary societies are not primarily class societies although they often describe themselves as such. For Luhmann, the "clustered unequal distribution" of resources designated by "class" is secondary to social problems caused by functional differentiation itself, such as environmental risks. Nevertheless, class semantics retain a certain credibility in modern functionally differentiated societies, which do not endorse stratificatory differentiation and aim for universal participation. According to Luhmann, the semantics of class overstate the importance of unequal distributions of resources, but this doesn't mean that there are no other, arguably more severe, forms of inequality. In later works, he discusses social inequalities caused by functional differentiation itself, when the exclusion from one functional system leads to a cascade of exclusions in other systems. He illustrates this with examples from the Global South:

Without an address, one cannot register for school (India). People who cannot read and write have hardly any chance on the labor market, and serious discussion (as in Brazil) about depriving them of the franchise becomes feasi-



ble. People who find no accommodation outside shanty towns enjoy no legal protection in emergencies; but landlords are also unable to assert their rights if eviction from such areas would provoke too much unrest politically. Many such examples can be cited, and they demonstrate links across all functional systems. *Exclusion integrates far more strongly than inclusion*—integration in the sense defined as restriction of the degree of freedom for selection. (Luhmann 2013/1997, p. 25)

In an ironic twist, exclusion is not described as a lack of integration but as the result of an over-integration of modern functional-differentiated society. Compared to ecological problems such as climate change and social inequality resulting from exclusion, both of which are linked to functional differentiation, traditional class-based inequality pales in importance and urgency. This comparison between the semantics of class and the phenomenon of exclusion illustrates the novelty and critical edge of Luhmann's perspective. For from belittling social inequality as such, Luhmann brings under-observed forms of inequality to our attention.

The fourth chapter, "Individual, Individuality, Individualization", opens with the prominent role of the "individual" (*vis-à-vis* society) for sociological theorizing. Unsurprisingly, Luhmann argues that the proliferation of semantics surrounding the "individual" is the result of functional differentiation. In the middle of the essay, he offers a suggestive reflection on the relation between semantics and social structure, which seemingly transcends the presupposed correlation:

On the basis of this brief analysis, one has the impression, on the one hand, that the seventeenth-century semantics of individuality holds possibilities for change that cannot yet be put into effect and, on the other, that the ground is prepared for changes not expressed in this semantics. (p. 244)

The emergent semantics of individuality are at the same time ahead of their time and confined by their time, the limits of stratified society: "something is being tried out within semantics through the varying of ideas that cannot find its final social assignment" (p. 245). Here, Luhmann's analysis seems to suggest at least a relative autonomy of semantics (and thus culture). Ultimately, however, the discourse of individuality remains an impotent potentiality with no effect on social structure and the differentiation of society. Only once functional differentiation becomes a social reality, the semantics of individuality develop into a full-blown individualism, in which the individual is no longer included but excluded from society—which manifests in an increase in personal freedom.

The final chapter on "Culture as a Historical Concept", published posthumously, is interesting for the very fact that it is clearly not in the shape that its author would have given it before publication. In the first three paragraphs, which likely would have been expanded into a section, Luhmann dismisses various ways of defining culture, after which he proposes to analyze the concept of culture historically. Instead of defining "culture" himself, Luhmann engages in a second-order observation, observing other observers' use of "culture". While this approach is not intrinsically superior, it undoubtedly has the benefit of circumventing the contingency of definitions—concepts can always be defined otherwise—by delegating it to the historical environment.



According to Luhmann, “culture” emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century (alongside functional differentiation) as a conceptual means to compare and historicize, especially one’s own nation in comparison to others and Europe to the rest of the world. The third section on culture as “memory” is intriguing but insufficiently integrated with the rest of the argument. In the fifth and final section, Luhmann arrives at the conclusion that “culture is a perspective for the observation of observers” and that “attempts to fix ‘culture’ as a fact on the same level of objects [...] are doomed to failure” (p. 318f.). While I agree with Luhmann’s refusal to reify culture, I don’t believe that a historical conception of culture is the way to go for cultural sociology. Luhmann himself defines his basic concepts, such as “meaning”, “communication” and “semantics”, in a rather a-historic fashion, which allows him to treat “culture” as a mere “semantic” proliferating and gaining credibility through functional differentiation. As cultural sociologists, we might be interested in historical discourses about “culture”, but Luhmann doesn’t offer compelling reasons why we should not observe society utilizing our own conception of culture.

The volume concludes with an afterword by Michael King, who explores the reasons for “the disappointing reception of Luhmann’s ideas by Anglophone intellectuals and their failure to appreciate the originality of his vision or the breadth and depth of his scholarship” (p. 320). According to him, the difficulties that Luhmann’s “subversive” and “amoral” theory faces are not inherent to scientific communication but related to the institutionalization of sociology in academic organizations, which are—and to a higher degree in the anglophone world—oriented towards economic profitability (especially through tuition fees and funding for empirical research), reputation rankings and moral concerns. King is not only critical of the neglect for Luhmann’s theory, but also of its selective and eclectic appropriation by specialists in different fields or even Luhmann’s own disciples, who thought about ways to implement limited steerability into the theory (e.g., through the theory of “reflexive law”). King positions himself as a staunch defender of the Luhmannian orthodoxy: “There is no middle ground where one can pick up and run with aspects of the theory one wishes to adopt while ignoring the remainder” (p. 331f.). Ironically, this attitude is another reason for the limited success of Luhmann’s theory: orthodoxy permits only a recombination of elements within the limits of Luhmann’s theory, which stifles innovation and impedes connectivity (“Anschlussfähigkeit”). While the theory may retain some value as an alternative and radically different view on society, what is the purpose of such a perspective, if one cannot implement its insights into other frameworks? Being offered a forced choice between Luhmann’s sociology and institutionalized ‘mainstream’ sociology, one is left to wonder (in the spirit of Luhmann) about the third option(s) excluded by this distinction.

Of all the three books reviewed, this has been my favorite. Instead of reading about how other observers observe Luhmann, *The Making of Meaning* allows us to become—like Habermas—observers of Luhmann himself. I am grateful to the editor and the translators for making this selection of essays available to a broader public—not so much for the introduction and the afterword framing the original contributions. While they provide some helpful information and contextualization, especially for readers unfamiliar with the author, their attempts to rebrand Luhmann (Morgner) or defend Luhmannian orthodoxy (King) tend to obscure the insights



to be gained from Luhmann, while at the same time overstating the coherence of his oeuvre. I am convinced that many cultural sociologists will find inspiration in Luhmann, but I also believe that his thinking needs to be defended against his most devout followers. Luhmann's oeuvre is simply too important to be left in the hands of his disciples.

## **A companion to Luhmann's theory of society**

*The Anthem Companion to Niklas Luhmann* is one of the few edited volumes on Luhmann available in English and to my knowledge the only one covering the breadth of his theory of society. The lineup includes many well-known Luhmann experts as well as younger scholars—though it should be noted that almost half of its authors are emeriti. The 13-page introduction by the editor Ralf Rogowski is nothing short of remarkable: it offers an overview over Luhmann's biography and oeuvre, a lucid presentation and explanation of the core tenants of his theory, while also summarizing each contribution in a paragraph and listing all (longer) monographs by Luhmann available in English (up until 2018). The book itself can be divided into two parts: the first part offers a range of substantial contributions that elucidate (and sometimes even criticize!) Luhmann's theorizing of the major societal subsystems; the second part is composed of shorter essays addressing more peripheral topics and aspects of Luhmann's theory (and biography).

The chapters in the first part cover the most important functional systems such as politics (Thornhill, Mascareño), law (Thornhill, Nobles and Schiff), economy (Mascareño), science (Verschraegen), religion (Vanderstraeten) and art (Buckermann). While some contributions are rather orthodox, others attempt to move beyond the orthodoxy, developing their own arguments out of a critique of Luhmann. Thornhill, for example, argues we should pay attention to the limitations and blind spots of Luhmann's theory, for example, in his discussion of politics and law that lacks a systematic reflection on the military system and the role of war. Likewise, Mascareño offers an update of Luhmann's theory of politics and economy for the twenty first century, addressing the rise of the internet and social media while also discussing financial crises, recent protest movements and the COVID-19 pandemic. It is probably no coincidence that the most critical contributions are those addressing more than one functional system. In (Luhmann's) theory, the boundaries between different social systems are simple and clear-cut, but the empirical complexity and interwovenness of modern society seems to call for more theoretical sophistication.

The miscellaneous contributions in the second part of the volume discuss Luhmann's "not only skeptical but also polemical" relation to "culture" (Baecker), the critical potential of his systems theory (Möller and Siri), Luhmann's early (1966!) contribution to a sociology of algorithms (Esposito), Luhmann's biography—and the Holocaust—from a Luhmannian perspective (Dammann) and, finally, three personal encounters with Luhmann (Teubner). From a cultural sociological perspective, Baecker's essay on Luhmann's "skeptical notion of culture" is particularly interesting. It opens with a stark yet accurate statement: "Niklas Luhmann



tried to get rid of the concept of culture” (p. 129). Baecker offers an illuminating explanation for Luhmann’s skepticism and polemics against the concept of culture, arguing that it competed “with the concept of systems”. Both highlight the contingency of solutions to the problem of social order, which means “they are possible, but not necessary, and may change any time” (p. 130). While the functionalism of systems theory is able to harness and limit the contingency of possible solutions, “the concept of culture decries them as contingent without worrying about the consequences” (p. 130). The operations of culture produce “signs of out things”, which allows for comparisons and renders their contingency visible:

Culture not only invites but forces reflection. That reflection may run wild if it is not controlled by some notion of system, which looks not only at contingencies but also solutions in terms of the problems they solve and the complexities they are able to deal with. (p. 132)

The horror in facing the abyss of contingency, of cultural imagination unbound, could be connected to a historical blind spot in Luhmann’s theory, namely German National Socialism and the Holocaust. Unfortunately, the respective chapter by Hammann does not really address this issue. According to Baecker, it was only in the 1990s, when Luhmann became aware of the lasting impact of the cultural turn on the social sciences and humanities, that he “abandoned his attempts to distance himself from culture” (p. 134). In the last years of his life, Luhmann struggled and experimented to incorporate culture into his theory, as the “memory” of a society (p. 132f.), as a “code” to distinguish between “appropriate and inappropriate contributions to communication” (p. 133) or as a “confirmation and condensation of meaning” that allows its “reuse in various situations” (p. 134). According to Baecker, the common denominator of these attempts is an understanding of culture as a mechanism of “double closure”, which builds upon the operational closure of systems through communication. Thus, “culture” is concerned with the regulation of and reflection on “communication”, putting them on par as basic sociological concepts.

What makes Baecker’s contribution so valuable for cultural sociologists is the very fact that he does not gloss over Luhmann’s issues with the concept of culture, while at the same acknowledging his studies on social structure and semantics as a genuine and “important contribution to cultural sociology” (p. 134). Baecker, himself a disciple, breaks with the orthodox fallacy that Luhmann left us with a finished theory, which has only to be applied and amended, while in fact his thinking was very much changing up until his death. Luhmann’s thoughts on culture, which were evolving with and adapting to changes in the intellectual environment without ever being able to settle satisfactorily within his theory, are a case in point. Aside from this chapter, which offers an intriguing starting point for a comparison between Luhmann’s theorizing and contemporary cultural sociology, I personally enjoyed Esposito’s brief essay on Luhmann and algorithms, which serves as an appetizer for her book-length application of Luhmann theory to contemporary artificial intelligence (Esposito 2022). Still, I believe that the volume will be most useful for scholars interested in Luhmann’s theory of society. This does not exclude cultural sociologists, whom I want to encourage to develop their own cultural theory of society.



## Conclusion: towards a cultural theory of society

The three books reviewed attest to a continued interest in Luhmann's work. Their discussion also revealed that Luhmann should be an author of interest for many cultural sociologists: The Habermas–Luhmann debate speaks to central concerns of civil sphere theory (Alexander 2006); Luhmann's work on social structure and semantics can be understood as an empirical cultural sociology (of certain historical discourses); last but not least, his theory of society is relevant for cultural sociologists working on specific functional systems such as law, science or religion. Nonetheless, if we check Luhmann's work against the criteria for a "strong program" proposed by Alexander and Smith (2003/2001), the results are ambivalent at best: first, cultural autonomy is severely limited, at least if we understand it in terms of the autonomy of semantics vis-à-vis social structure; second, while there are instances of "thick description" in Luhmann's empirical work, he often tells the reader instead of showing and thickly describing his material; third, Luhmann rejects the very notion of causality, preferring terms such as "adaptation", "compatibility" or "conditioning"; and, finally, returning to the first point, it is always "semantics" that has to adapt to, be compatible with or is conditioned by "social structure". Yet, considering "meaning as sociology's basic concept" (Luhmann 1990) or social structure as "differentiation of meaning" (Morgner, pp. 16–19), Luhmann's theory is not a clear case of a 'weak' program either.

Getting into Luhmann follows a steep learning curve. Arguably, like the social systems in his theory, his theoretical system is operationally closed, communicating in an idiosyncratic language only selectively irritated by its sociological environment. While I believe that reading Luhmann is superior to reading his interpreters, I am ready to acknowledge that second-order observations of his work by the authors, editors and contributors of the reviewed as well as other books might help to flatten this learning curve. One question, however, remains: to what end and for what uses should we study Luhmann—or any other major sociological theorist for that matter?

We can think of theories as possible solutions for problems we encounter in our research. Orthodox Luhmannians, like King, seem to suggest that Luhmann's theory is the solution for (almost) all sociological problems—and also defines what counts as such. In their view, reading Luhmann should lead to an intellectual conversion, in which the reader accepts the premises and the main body of Luhmann's theory—which, of course, doesn't really exist, at least not in a monolithic and definitive version. Such an approach stifles theoretical innovation and exacerbates the insularity of the Luhmannian discourse. Most importantly, however, such missionary efforts are unlikely to succeed: only few readers will be willing to give up their prior theoretical commitments; most will be interested in conceptual tools to solve their own sociological problems.

More promising is a pragmatic and eclectic approach to Luhmann's theory, where we adopt his solutions for specific purposes. A good example is Esposito's work on *Artificial Communication* (2022), which leverages Luhmann's distinction between communication and mental processes to make sense of our interaction with algorithms and AI chatbots. Despite the fact that she works firmly within Luhmann's



theory, her solution to the sociological problem of artificial intelligence does not require us to buy the whole theory package. In my own research, I have repeatedly turned to Luhmann and employed some of his conceptual solutions for my own problems—without using the overall framework of his theory.

A third option is to reject the solutions offered by Luhmann, but accept his framing of the problem. This has, for example, been done by Habermas with regard to the “steering problem”. The most comprehensive problem that Luhmann has dealt with during his entire academic career has been the development of a “theory of society”. I would like to conclude this essay by encouraging us, cultural sociologists, to learn from Luhmann’s theoretical ambitions, even if we ultimately have to reject his theory. Civil sphere theory provides an ideal starting point for a cultural theory of society. Alexander’s *The Civil Sphere* (2006) offers a cultural sociological elaboration of what Luhmann would have described as a subsystem of society, including the all-important binaries, if it weren’t for the fact that Luhmann was skeptical of the capacity of moral communication to organize as a system as well as of its centrality for modern society. Writing against the Luhmannian consensus at the time, the German sociologist Hondrich (2002) convincingly argued that the public sphere driven by morality can be described as a supersystem, whose task is among other things to protect the principle of functional differentiation itself through scandalization (e.g., by exposing and condemning the bribery of political officials). Alexander’s theory of societalization (2019) offers a complementary perspective, in which the civil sphere invades other spheres pressuring them for institutional change. While there might not be a clear hierarchy of subsystems in a functionally differentiated society, there are empirical and normative reasons for believing in the primacy of the civil sphere, at least in modern liberal democracies, acting as *primus inter pares*.

Such a cultural theory of society would require substantial cultural sociological work on other (non-civil) spheres, which civil sphere theory only mentions in passing, such as the “state” or the “market”, including theoretical models of their discourses and institutions. Steps towards a cultural sociological theory of the economy were made by Alexander (2011) and Tognato (2012), who highlighted the cultural aspects of economic life and its institutions employing concepts such as “code”, “narrative” and “performance”. Recently, Klíma (2022) outlined the conception of a “gaming sphere”, not only vis-à-vis the civil sphere, but also as an independent domain with its own cultural structures and social institutions. Last but not least, we have to be reflexive and develop a theory of the scientific or academic sphere, with its own binary code (maybe, as in Luhmann, operating with a true/false binary), its communicative institutions (associations, journals, etc.) as well as pedagogical institutions (universities, study programs, etc.); rivaling narratives about scientific progress could mirror the debates on assimilation and multiculturalism discussed in *The Civil Sphere*. Developing such a cultural theory of society is a huge endeavor, but it doesn’t have to be the work of a single person.

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