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William Rasch

Soziale Systeme (1. Kapitel)

„Die folgenden Überlegungen gehen davon aus, daß es Systeme gibt." With this seemingly simple assertion, Niklas Luhmann begins Chapter 1. But what, exactly, is the claim? Is it that there are things in the world, among them systems? If that is the case, then why must this fact be assumed („gehen davon aus") instead of unambiguously stated: „Es gibt Systeme"? And is the impersonal nature of this assumption – the fact that the „Überlegungen", and not their author, assume the existence of systems – a deliberate and integral part of the general claim or merely a stylistic choice, a way of making the opening sentence of the chapter achieve a grander rhythmic eloquence? Luhmann helps us out in the next sentence: „Sie [die Überlegungen] beginnen also nicht mit einem erkenntnistheoretischen Zweifel." We may here be tempted to believe that with Luhmann's first sentence we have arrived at the end of a process of epistemological skepticism and therefore have been returned to a place of certainty, not the Cartesian Cogito, ergo sum, but the more objective: Systems operate, therefore they exist. And we might further suppose that from this position of achieved ontological certainty we might be able to describe systems in the same way we can describe all aspects of the empirical world. Luhmann seems to support such a surmise by using a traditionally ontological way of speaking when he notes that „Aussagen […] beziehen sich […] auf die wirkliche Welt" (SS 30); and in the last sentence of this opening paragraph he becomes ever more comfortable with the notion of reality as the suitable *Endstation* of reference. It appears, then, that in our re-

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flections and considerations, we can refer to systems because systems exist. But then we come to the first sentence of the second paragraph: „Dies soll zunächst nur als Markierung einer Position festgehalten werden." (SS 30) We are brought up short. So, the assertion of the reality of systems is the marking of a position? What is the status of this position, a position that may presumably be revised? And then we return to the lovely German verbal phrase „davon ausgehen" and realize that perhaps Cartesian certainty is the last thing we can reckon with. The reality we presuppose (davon ausgehen) is just a point from which we can now begin (davon ausgehen).

What is going on? What's going on is a type of linguistic training in circular, self-reflexive thinking. In the *Vorwort* we learned that universal theory must include itself in its reflections on the world, which implies that systems theory must also be one of systems theory's objects of investigation. In the *Einführung* we further learned the following: „Die Aussage ‚es gibt Systeme' besagt also nur, daß es Forschungsgegenstände gibt, die Merkmale aufweisen, die es rechtfertigen, den Systembegriff anzuwenden" (SS 16). Toward the end of Chapter 1, we learn, „Eine ‚System*theorie*' und eine funktionale *Methodologie* verorten die funktionale Analyse zunächst in der Systemreferenz des Wissenschaftssystems" (SS 87), from which we may deduce that "Forschungsgegenstände" are those objects that are observed from that social system – „Wissenschaft" – which is charged with the task of scientific „Forschung". Therefore, apparently, „die folgenden Überlegungen" about the existence of systems are themselves objects of research located within the system that researches systems. What are we to think? *Spinnt er*?

Yes, but in a good way, like a spider. Niklas Luhmann's systems theory spins a web of necessary self/other relationships that is fully consonant with major trends in modern philosophy since German idealism, though largely filtered through Parsonian sociology, cybernetics, complexity theory, and other social and natural science movements of the second half of the twentieth century. When he refers to reality, we must banish from our thoughts traditional philosophical realism based on a subject/object dualism, because any clean separation of self and other will always be mutable and operational, never fixed in the sense that the word reality implies. Universality, as Luhmann uses the term to describe the nature of his own theory, means, in effect, limitation, quite the opposite of what one might at first think. Luhmann's systems theory is not the proverbial view

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from nowhere, as if it could look at the world of systems (social or otherwise) as a totality *sub specie aeternitatis*. If a universal theory must place itself within the domain of so-called objects that it studies, then it cannot stand outside of that domain and see it as a circumscribed whole. Rather, it can observe the whole, of which it is a part, only from within, thus never completely, never in its totality as if from some external, transcendent, godlike perspective. This limitation, however, must not be equated with „erkenntnistheoretische Zweifel". If there is no outside perspective that can confirm the veracity of theoretical statements about the world of systems, neither can there be an outside perspective that can falsify such statements. All statements (Luhmann will say: observations) are internal to what is talked about (observed); thus Luhmann's realism is not metaphysical, not dependent on an external control that checks statements for their referential verity, but internally coherent in the way Hilary Putnam suggests:

> I shall refer to [my perspective] as the *internalist* perspective, because it is characteristic of this view to hold that *what objects does the world consist of*? is a question that it only makes sense to ask *within* a theory or description. Many ‚internalist' philosophers, though not all, hold further that there is more than one ‚true' theory or description of the world. ‚Truth', in an internalist view, is some sort of (idealized) rational acceptability – some sort of ideal coherence of our beliefs with each other and with our experiences *as those experiences are themselves represented in our belief system* – and not correspondence with the mind-independent or discourse-independent ‚state of affairs'. There is no God's Eye point of view that we can know or usefully imagine; there are only the various points of view of actual persons reflecting various interests and purposes that their descriptions and theories subserve.[1]

Perhaps Luhmann would not have endorsed certain aspects of Putnam's terms of art (e. g. belief, interests, and the notion of the self that is implied by the pronoun our), but replace „belief system" with „social system" and you have a fair description of how Luhmann's „internalist perspective" on an immanent reality works.

1 Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, London: Cambridge UP, 1981, 49–50.

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Such a perspective, however, affects the way that social beings (including sociologists) are able to describe society, or, more precisely, the way scientific „Überlegungen" can make the assumptions they make about the reality of systems. As readers we want to know what social systems are, else why pick up (or down load) „Soziale Systeme". Thus Luhmann must provide us with some basic definitions to orient our journey, that is, must give us some systematic account of what a system is, communicate to us how communication functions, and enlighten us about the function of a functional methodology. The coy way I have worded the previous sentence gives an impression of the difficulty: Luhmann cannot proceed axiomatically, cannot give us unalterable definitions as if they were a set of building blocks, complete with instructions on how to use them. Although he deploys the word „Merkmale" in the passage from the introduction cited above, and uses the term „Grundkonzepte" in Section II of this chapter (SS 35), he is in fact quite shy about defining systems or anything else in terms of inherent properties that then add up to an answer to the question: What is a system? And how could he rely on discrete, inherent properties? If there is more than one description of the world, and such descriptions depend upon the system perspective that executes the describing, then there is no way to catalog all the objects in the world, since each system produces, as it were, a different set. If no God-System exists, then from which system could all properties, potential and actual, be tabulated?

There is no such system, not even „Wissenschaft", though it is the vocation of „Forschung" within the „Wissenschaftssystem" to locate „Merkmale" of „Forschungsgegenstände". The question then becomes not so much: What are systems? as: How are systems made observable? The answer: Through the use of distinctions. „Als Ausgangspunkt jeder systemtheoretischen Analyse hat […] die *Differenz von System und Umwelt* zu dienen" (SS 35). A system can be observed as a system only in contrast with its necessary correlate, an environment. What follows, then, is not a catalog of traits, but the story of a relationship. Systems could not exist without environments, could not refer to themselves were there not an other to serve as contrast. „In diesem Sinne ist *Grenz*erhaltung (boundary maintenance) Systemerhaltung" (SS 35). With this system/environment distinction, we are not told what a system is. Rather, we are merely given the necessary condition for the origin and self-reproduction of systems, namely the ability to draw a line, to establish a border and maintain it. Furthermore, the environ-

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ment is everything that the system is not, which means that there is no one, single environment, because for every separate system there is a different environment. This last point is important; it means that for any given system, all other systems disappear, as it were, into the environment. Imagine, for a moment, three basic systems: the physical system (conventionally: matter), the psychic system (conventionally: mind), the social system (conventionally: society). There is no common environment for these three systems; for each system, the other two form the environment. Now imagine that each system can produce internal differentiations. Within the social system, functional differentiation produces subsystems, for instance law, economy, art, politics, education, etc. This process of duplicating the system/environment distinction within the system makes it possible to set up levels of internally differentiated systems, creating what Luhmann calls a „Hierarchie" (SS 38), without implying layers of authority or control. It is through such internal differentiation that a system enjoys greater complexity, which means greater opportunities for responding to the impulses coming from the environment. For each of these sub-systems (at whatever level), all the others form an internal environment, that is, internal to the social system as a whole.

Even this brief and wildly incomplete sketch should make clear the problem that normal language has to deal with. Since a system or subsystem must also be a part of the environment for all other systems, it becomes increasingly difficult to visualize the whole. With its environment, on the one hand, and its internal differentiation, on the other, the social system becomes impossible to map two-dimensionally or model very well on a computer. Perhaps a metaphor is more useful than a figure or graph. Think of that childhood toy, a kaleidoscope. The material it is made of (cardboard, bits of colored glass, etc.) as well as the perceiving eye and necessary light source comprise the physical system; the visual perceptions themselves and the (silent) thoughts they inspire are the psychic system; if the patterns of light and color produced by turning the movable part of the toy form a kind of visual language about which that speaks to us and provokes a response – even if only „Wow" or „Cool" – then we have a social system. Note that what is social is neither material nor mental, but communication provoked

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by the shifting play of light and color.[2] Note also that strictly speaking we cannot say that by turning the mechanical device we directly cause the new pattern, but only that our actions are the cause of the fact *that* there is a new pattern. A certain amount of contingency conditions which glass particles will catch the light in a particular way to produce the colored pattern that is produced. So, though each shift of the apparatus perturbs what metaphorically we can call the social system and triggers change, none dictates exactly what that change will be. So, to parse the metaphor explicitly: what we see as patterns are individual subsystems coming to the fore, with the result that as each pattern (subsystem) comes into view, all other possible patterns (subsystems) „disappear" into the internal environment of the social system, just as the external environment (cardboard, glass, eye) remains outside the domain of society as a whole. This may not be a perfect metaphorical map of what Luhmann is attempting to chart in this chapter, but it should give a fair idea of why it is difficult to set in stone the essential properties of a system.

Nevertheless, we can talk about the basic elements of a system; though typically enough, we can do so only by making a distinction:

> Die Differenz System/Umwelt muß von einer zweiten, ebenfalls konstitutiven Differenz unterschieden werden: der Differenz von *Element* und *Relation*. […] So wenig wie es Systeme ohne Umwelten gibt oder Umwelten ohne Systeme, so wenig gibt es Elemente ohne relationale Verknüpfungen oder Relationen ohne Elemente. In beiden Fällen ist die Differenz eine Einheit (wir sagen ja auch: „die" Differenz), aber sie wirkt nur als Differenz. (SS 41)

To understand the difference between these two distinctions, Luhmann luckily gives us his own visual metaphor. (see SS 41) If we take a house to stand for a system, then the rooms of the house act as the subsystems and the materials for building the house (stones, beams, nails, etc.) as the elements. In the first case, the bedroom, bathroom, dining room, hallway, and kitchen act as the internal environment for the living room, followed by all the other permutations of system and environment. Yet, the entire house, all the subsystems (rooms) of the

2 Though without the material and the mental to serve as environment (and thus as „conditions of possibility"), the social could not exist.

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house consist of the same elements, namely the specified building materials in all of their various combinations or relations.

OK. Fine. A house is a nice if somewhat static image for illustrating the nature of these two fundamental pairs of distinguished concepts. But we still do not know what an element is, other than the fact that the fundamental element of a particular system is the same for all its subsystems. Where and how do we find such an element? Again Luhmann returns to the basic epistemological question with which he opened the chapter. The concept Element is neither merely an analytical tool – a convenient fiction – nor is it an ontically given object – a substantial thing. (42) In a way we can say: Elements exist, but are not found in nature. Here is how he puts it: „Anders als Wortwahl und Begriffstradition es vermuten lassen, ist die Einheit eines Elementes […] nicht ontisch vorgegeben. Sie wird vielmehr als Einheit erst durch das System konstituiert, das ein Element als Element für die Relationierungen in Anspruch nimmt." (SS 42) Here again we run into Luhmann's circular reasoning. On the one hand, „Element ist also jeweils das, was für ein System als nicht weiter auflösbare Einheit fungiert." (SS 43) On the other hand, „Elemente sind Elemente nur für die Systeme, die sie als Einheit verwenden, und sie sind es nur *durch* diese Systeme" (SS 43; emphasis added). Again, we are at first hard-pressed to understand this apparent paradox.

With the mathematization of nature, Luhmann says, what we see as things become as decomposable, almost infinitely so. Entities can be defined by their component parts, which in turn can also be decomposed. Thus, elements are but links in a chain. That beam, which was once part of a tree (which was decomposed in order to produce the beam), can be further decomposed into constituent parts (wood chips, sawdust, compounds, molecules, atoms, subatomic particles, etc.). But, as a beam, it is used as an element and eventually becomes part of something larger again, namely the house. In other words, for it to become a basic element of a house, a tree must be reduced to a beam (a piece of lumber) but not to a molecule or an atom. (Another example: To be the essential condition of possibility for life, randomly assembled units of hydrogen and oxygen will not do; rather those units must be linked precisely as H_2O, called water.) As an element of a house, that beam, then, becomes a constituent part of a larger whole. But, Luhmann goes on the say, it is the system itself – the house – that constitutes the element we have labeled beam. It has not physically brought it into being *ex nihilo*, it has simply located the link of the decomposable chain that it needs and

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arrested the decomposition at that point. Ergo: that which constitutes the system is constituted by the system.

We can also approach this problem in another way. The reader will eventually learn that for Luhmann the basic element of the social system we call society is communication. Those kaleidoscopic patterns of color and light in the example above were, so to speak, bits and bytes of information. Yet, since communication equals society, communication cannot precede society (cannot exist outside of society, as Luhmann says [60f.]). Both the social system and its basic element, communication, emerge simultaneously. In other words, communication exists when it is recognized as such by the system – *Gesellschaft* – that both constitutes and uses communication as its basic element. Markings on the wall of a cave or on a stone found in the desert can be accidental and random, they can be abstractly decorative, or they can have what we call meaning. For these marks to communicate meaning, an intention to communicate meaning must be ascribed to them. The markings on the Rosetta Stone (found in Egypt at the end of the eighteenth century) may at first sight already have had all the indications of being meaningful, but they actually had meaning only when deciphered as a language. The stone became a means of communication when recognized as such by those who, in a manner of speaking, were able to communicate with it or, more accurately, convincingly communicate about it as a form of communication. Hence, communication is real, but only after what was found in nature has become a communicating participant in one or another social system.

Very roughly speaking, everything that has been said up until now can be subsumed under the notion self-referential closure. For this Luhmann uses the term „autopoiesis" (SS 43, SS 60ff.), which was coined by Maturana and Varela. For Luhmann, the notion of autopoiesis represents a paradigm shift in systems-theoretical thinking in the sense that now one can think the self-reproduction of systems and not merely their self-organization. Autopoiesis is the name given to the fact that the fundamental, indivisible, non-decomposable elements of a system are produced by the system itself. There is of course an environmental, material precondition for the possibility of existence for systems and their elements, but that precondition does not produce the basic element as element within the system; only the elements themselves can reproduce themselves (as communication rather than vocal chords, chisel and stone, paper and pencil). Communication – not the individual – communicates, as Luhmann likes to

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say. Stop! Think about the sentence you just read: „Communication – not the individual – communicates, as Luhmann likes to say." Is it a contradictory statement? Did it attribute to an individual (Luhmann) the communication that only communication, not individuals, communicate? More elaborately, did I (an individual) say (communicate) that Luhmann (an individual) says (communicates) that only communication communicates? In other words, by using „I" and „Luhmann", did the sentence contradict itself? No. „I" is a pronoun and „Luhmann" is a proper noun. What you (another pronoun) just read are words on a page or screen; you did not read the thoughts or consciousness of „I" or „Luhmann". If now „you" produce words on page or screen (or simply curse your fate *sotto voce*), „we" have an example of the basic element of the social system – communication – reproducing itself out of itself: words responding to words. That the minds (consciousness) of reader and writer are necessary prerequisites for such communication is clear; that they, rather than communication itself, communicate is not clear. Right now, all „you" see are words on a page or screen, and „I" have no clue whether there is even a „you" reading this.

All this sounds deeply counterintuitive, perhaps even insufferable. One cannot maintain this level of precision (if that is what it is) in daily interactions. The proper noun „Luhmann" refers to the author of „Soziale Systeme" and the pronoun „I" to the author of this chapter, and the reader must assume intentions (and not the proverbial monkey at a keyboard) to make sense of what is written. Yet it is necessary to stake out this almost risible level of abstraction in order to become accustomed to the nature of the paradoxical or at least contradictory claims that abound in Luhmann's systems theory, the most surprising of which is the notion that not only is the human being not the basic element of society, but that the human individual cannot even be considered a unity at all:

> Es gibt Maschinen, chemische Systeme, lebende Systeme, bewußte Systeme, sinnhaft-kommunikative (soziale) Systeme; aber es gibt keine all dies zusammenfassenden Systemeinheiten. Der Mensch mag für sich selbst oder für Beobachter als Einheit erscheinen, aber er ist kein System. Erst recht kann aus einer Mehrheit von Menschen kein System gebildet werden. (SS 67f.)

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There can be no system of people (no society of people according to traditional definitions), because the individual participates in many systems which themselves cannot be integrated into a super-system. Kant's transcendental subject, that uses *Verstand* to understand the workings of the empirical world and *Vernunft* to create for itself a moral universe in which it finds its ideal home, may think of itself as autonomous, but at the level of systems (or at least of systems theory), this subject participates discontinuously but simultaneously in multiple systems (living, psychic, and social). For the social system (society and its subsystems), the living and psychic systems in which human life and consciousness participate remain in the environment. Only communication (this, what is happening now on page and screen) participates in society. Only communication can be the basic element, not the individual or subject or family or community. One may call this attitude anti-humanism or, more generously, post-humanism, but either way it definitively rejects the traditional pathos of *Bildung* and emancipation. Human beings do not create society in order to flourish as well-rounded, rational, autonomous members of a community that reflects their humane values; nor is there an essence of humanity as *Gattungswesen* (Marx) that needs the proper social order to allow for its complete self-realization. We may wish to see it that way, but at a more basal level, a network of communicative systems and their environments (which form the physical and conscious conditions of these communicative social systems' possibility) evolve to deal in ever more complex ways with the problems they themselves produce. Some of these communicative systems – *Wissenschaft*, for example – also make it their task to create narratives, often rival narratives, to explain themselves to themselves.

The most prominent rival narratives in the social sciences were labeled by members of the Frankfurt School (Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse, respectively) as the distinction between traditional (or affirmative) and critical theory. One can see that these are evaluative and therefore asymmetrical distinctions; the more neutral version might posit description as the other of critique. At any rate, Luhmann rejects critical theory (as ultimately either impossible or inadequate) and refers in this chapter to functional analysis. From the perspective of practitioners of Critical Theory, the concept of function is essentially conservative, because they believe that function serves the interest of preserving a status quo. In early cybernetic literature and in the sociology of Talcott Parsons, notions of homeostasis and stability seem to throttle change.

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The function of a system is to maintain a balance. A functional analysis, based on the presupposed need for equilibrium, so the argument goes, would simply be a user's manual designed to keep, for example, a given legal or political system in good running order regardless of the harm it may cause its citizens or the world at large. Critical theory operates on the level of architecture or design and demands value judgement; functional analysis, on their view, requires nothing more than the mere technical expertise of the mechanic[3]. In this respect we can say that systems theory is a descriptive theory, not a prescriptive one. Luhmann does not address the Frankfurt School head on here (though footnote 109 on page 85 alludes to it), but he does articulate a notion of functional analysis in the era of self-referential systems that is far more complicated than the stereotypical view. Essentially, everything changes with the introduction of autopoiesis. If elements are not things found in nature, but only those things found in systems, as elements; and if elements reproduce themselves out of themselves, then the continuity of a system, its ability to maintain closure and distinguish itself from an environment, consists in the continuous production, decay, and renewal of elements. This continuous decay and renewal Luhmann calls „eine neuartige *Interdependenz von Auflösung und Reproduktion*." (78) Only by disappearing do elements serve as elements of the system. „Systeme mit temporalisierter Komplexität sind auf *ständigen Zerfall angewiesen.* Die laufende Desintegration schafft gleichsam Platz und Bedarf für Nachfolgeelemente, sie ist notwendige Mitursache der Reproduktion". (SS 78) We are left with the vertiginous sense that order is produced and preserved by continuous dissolution, that stability rests on ceaseless instability. No self-respecting Critical Theorist would trade her commitment to progressive change for this absolute and directionless alteration. Change is not just uncontrollably evolutionary, she would argue, but should aim at the realization of the Good. Luhmann would respond that the role of the social theorist is not that of a social engineer (if such were even possible). Nor is the social theorist a prosecutor, judge, and jury all rolled into one who conducts a trial in which history or society is the defendant.

3 Habermas synthesizes the view in a single sentence: „Diese ‚verwaltete Welt' war für Adorno die Vision des äußersten Schreckens; für Luhmann ist sie zur trivialen Voraussetzung geworden." Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, Band 2, Frankfurt/M. 1981, 462.

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Having said that, however, it seems that Luhmann does offer a way for a system to see itself as if from the outside, to see that what it assumes to be its necessary order could have been and still could be different than it is. Functional analysis, as executed by *Wissenschaft* (in this case, social theory), does not adjudicate political or moral disputes, but instead offers the observed system a glimpse into what it cannot see for itself, namely the latency and contingency that comes with all systemic reductions of complexity. The incongruent „wissenschaftliche" (in this case, systems-theoretical) perspective on particular systems (law, politics, the economy, etc.) overwhelms them by showing them levels of complexity they cannot see for themselves. In other words, functional analysis displays that a given system has reduced complexity in a particular way and thereby has deliberately ignored and eventually forgotten that other ways had been possible. Functional analysis exposes the contingency inherent in all choices, including those choices that manage complexity in a particular systemic manner. This is spelled out nicely on pages 88-89, and I am tempted to cite the passages for emphasis, but will let the reader search out the two paragraphs that start on page 88 for him or herself. If you do, notice how scientific observation „irritiert, verunsichert, stört und zerstört möglicherweise" (SS 88) the system it observes. Notice also that it serves this irritating function with its ability to expose or bring to light latent structures, „das heißt: Relationen behandeln, die für das Objektsystem nicht sichtbar und vielleicht auch nicht sichtbar gemacht werden können, weil die Latenz selbst eine Funktion hat." (SS 89) At the same time, analysis can show the contingency of manifest structures and functions, those that do the actual work of the system. „In beiden Hinsichten – Latenz und Kontingenz – überfordert die Analyse ihr Objekt, und der systemtheoretische Begriffsapparat macht dies möglich." (SS 89) So, in a sense, functional analysis is critical, but not in a morally or politically normative way. Systems theory does not enunciate the law; it simply tells systems: You do what you do in this way. You could do it in a number of other ways. Think about it.

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Luhmann called himself a sociologist, thereby squarely placing himself (more correctly: his „Überlegungen") within a particular sub-system (sociology) of the social sub-system *Wissenschaft*. He also claimed to work empirically, thereby baff-

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ling many a working, empirical sociologist, especially of the Anglo-American variety. Those sociologists and students of sociology who are bitten by the Luhmann bug tend to revel in the counterintuitive and unexpected conclusion of the type: Social object *A* tends to be viewed as an example of *x* but really manifests the characteristics of *y*. One easily finds prototypes for this model of analysis in Luhmann's work: *Der Mensch* or *das Subjekt* tends to be seen as the basic unit of society but really the human being is no unity of all and is not even included as a totality within society. Or: Most view social theory as an exercise in normative value judgments but really social theory merely shows how value judgments function or, more often than not, function not at all. However, Luhmann's work also exceeds the boundaries of his chosen discipline, and the emphasis shifts from *social* theory to social *theory*, or simply philosophy, especially the sub-branch of philosophy referred to as epistemology. Reminding us at the end of the chapter of the „Paradigmawechsel in Richtung auf System/Umwelt-Konzepte und Theorie selbstreferentielle Systeme," (SS 90) Luhmann writes:

> Damit begründet auch die funktionale Analyse die Wahl ihres letzten Bezugsproblems selfstreferentiell – nämlich als Orientierung an einem Problem, das einerseits gegenstandsimmanent gedacht werden kann, aber zugleich in besonderem Maße durch die Analyse selbst zum Problem wird. Mit der Wahl eines Problems, das die Einheit der Differenz von Erkenntnis und Gegenstand formuliert, geht die funktionale Methode über eine bloße Methodenentscheidung hinaus und beansprucht, Theorie der Erkenntnis zu sein. (SS 90)

Here he explicitly moves beyond sociology. In some ways, Luhmann's epistemological concerns override his sociology. At any rate, in this chapter and elsewhere, the care with which he deals with the fundamental question of how language links to reality expresses a concern that exceeds a basic description and analysis of the workings of society. Or perhaps, the nuance of his language as a form of scientific communication is also a way of shaping the reality he describes. His theory is a descriptive one, yet the final sentence of this chapter again dances around the relationship of language to a pre-linguistic reality that is presumed but not known. „Damit ist keineswegs gesagt, daß die semantische Form, in der [Ergebnisse] präsentiert werden, der Realität ‚entspricht'; wohl aber, daß sie die Realität ‚greift',

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das heißt, sich als Ordnungsform im Verhältnis zu einer ebenfalls geordneten Realität bewährt" (SS 91). Luhmann's language does not passively correspond to reality; it penetrates and intervenes.

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