Soziale Systeme 13 (2007), Heft 1+2, S. 454-465 *© Lucius & Lucius, Stuttgart*

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Observing Communication: Niklas Luhmann and the Problem of Ethnography

Zusammenfassung: Ethnographische Studien präsentieren typischerweise beeindruckende Datenmengen, jedoch oft ohne dabei einen Beitrag zu disziplinären, theoretischen oder substanziellen Problemen zu leisten. Niklas Luhmann wird nicht als qualitativer Sozialforscher angesehen, seine Gesellschaftstheorie kann aber helfen, die soziologische Relevanz der Ethnographie zu steigern. Mit Blick auf dieses Problem diskutiert der vorliegende Artikel die Vorteile, die aus Luhmanns theoretischer Entscheidung resultieren, Sinn und Kommunikation statt Akteure und Handlungen zu beobachten. Darüber hinaus versucht der Artikel die Rolle zu bestimmen, die das menschliche Bewusstsein in der Gesellschaft spielt. Es gibt viele Möglichkeiten für die Ethnographen, die systemtheoretische Konstrukte zum Vorteil der qualitativen Sozialforschung zu nutzen. Hier wird vorgeschlagen, dass die Feldforscher sich auf die Beschreibung der Benutzung von strukturellen Kopplungen in Echtzeit und die Untersuchung von symbolisch generalisierten Differenzen konzentrieren.

According to one highly respected ethnographer, Paul Atkinson, ethnography is experiencing an orientation crisis: »Taken overall, the field of qualitative research presents a confusing picture. The manifest variety is not always related systematically or in a principled fashion to any particular disciplinary, theoretical or substantive concern« (2005, 6-7). If this state of confusion is a recognized problem among ethnographers, what might be the solution? According to Atkinson (2005, 23),

> [w]hat is needed is a radical renewal of our sensitivity to forms and modes of organization that interactionist and interpretative sociology has in principle been addressing for the past eighty years and more. We can retrieve some sense of that analytic tradition by connecting it with contemporary notions of complexity. Contemporary complexity theory provides a powerful set of analytic metaphors for comprehending the emergent properties of social phenomena and their diverse levels of order and meaning. It recalls classic interactionist and interpretative ideas of social emergence and the processes of social life.

The »radical renewal« of ethnography's sensitivity to forms and the organization of social complexity may, as I suggest in this paper, find methodological guidance and theoretical support in Niklas Luhmann's program for a sociological enlightenment. His capstone work, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, addresses the organization of complexity, the emergence of society, and forms

for processing meaning and order; yet »the society of society« appears to have gone largely unnoticed by ethnographers. Indeed, Luhmann is best known for analyzing the functional social systems of modern society, but many of his most promising insights relate to interaction systems and organizations, the traditional targets of ethnography.

It is easy to list reasons why ethnographers have not already turned to Luhmann's magnum opus for advice about how to cope with their confusion. Some may have lost interest as early as page 35, immediately after Luhmann announces that his project intends to develop a »radically antihumanistic« concept of society (1997, 35). Ethnographers have trained one another to observe actors; why would they read a 1200 page book outlining a sociology that excludes people from society? Other readers may have disregarded Luhmann because of his passion for theory, something that ethnographers typically eschew.

For whatever their reasons, ethnographers have not yet developed an interest in *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*. It is also apparent that systems theorists tend to disregard ethnographic and other qualitative research methods. I suggest that this situation is unfortunate for both social systems theory and ethnography, which could provide one another with mutual support. On one hand, Luhmann and his students have unfortunately earned a reputation for spinning theories they are unwilling to validate with data. On the other hand, ethnographers have developed highly effective strategies for collecting contextually rich data: participant observation, interviewing, content analysis of documents, visual sociology, case studies, the biographical method and other standard techniques. However, too many qualitative studies discuss data collected in the field without ever establishing a meaningful connection to sociological discourse. The underlying argument of this paper is that ethnography needs systems theory and systems theory needs data. In the following pages, I explain how Luhmann's theory may be used to reduce ethnography's current »state of confusion.« I first suggest that systems theory can help ethnography diagnose and treat its own basic problem: observation. In short, participant observers require a theory of observation that describes how to make sense of what they cannot see. Second, I emphasize the major role human consciousness plays in Luhmann's theory of society. Until this is made explicit, systems theory is unlikely to appeal to qualitative researchers. In the third part of my paper, I explain how Luhmann's decision to switch the basic unit of analysis from actors or actions to communication can inspire ethnography. While this decision has been sharply criticized, it enables one to appreciate the difference between perceiving social phenomena and understanding their meaning. I conclude by briefly outlining two possible strategies for informing ethnographic research with systems theory.

I. The Problem of Ethnography

As Paul Atkinson asserts, ethnography is in an »unhelpfully fragmented and incoherent state« due to the absence of a common disciplinary agenda. There is no shortage of texts that describe in detail what actors do and how they perform within their social worlds, but this »manifest variety« does not appear to lead toward a common sociological objective. Atkinson critiques »major commentators« on ethnography, such as Denzin and Lincoln (2005) and Ellis and Bochner (1996), for promoting »an image of contemporary qualitative research that is relentlessly innovative, allied to postmodernist views of social inquiry, and radically distant from its intellectual origins.«

From a systems theoretical point of view, the fundamental problem of ethnography is that while social events may indeed be observed in the field, their *meaning* may not be seen. In other words, ethnographic methods document empirical operations and communicative practices as they appear and disappear in real time, but the social quality of each operation – its meaning – must be imagined. Luhmann theorizes the form of meaning as »the difference between the actual and the possible (1997, 50). His fascination with complexity and contingency is rooted in this definition. Meaning organizes complexity when a system uses self-reference to selectively connect its operations (Luhmann 1997, 138-41). In the face of alternative selections, the system must determine a reason to actualize one of many possibilities. When a system decides to operate one way and not another, it gives its operation meaning as a temporarily resolved dilemma. The system constructs the same symbolically generalized dilemma again and again, reproducing itself while making a history of its choices. Luhmann asserts that »meaning requires that with everything that is immediately indicated, references to other possibilities are also meant and drawn in« (1997, 48, 72-3). He describes his method of observing society as an »operational approach« that examines how the system selectively »creates itself as a chain of operations« (2006, 46). The ethnographer may *see* actual operations, but the operational chain is imaginary. Observing society implies the ability to envision a system emerging out of different social operations, as well as the ability to picture a social system within each operation. Theory necessarily guides this kind of sociological imagination.

Ethnographers typically assume that a common sense approach to observation is adequate; that observing »consists of gathering impressions of the surrounding world through all relevant human faculties« (Adler/Adler 1994, 378). Luhmann builds upon a more precise theory of observation developed by George Spencer Brown (1997, 45-54). Making an observation entails drawing a two-sided distinction, and indicating one side. Communication is carried forward by praxis of meaning (*Sinnpraxis*), real time operations through which society draws distinctions, indicates one side, and prepares itself to make connections on the indicated side (Luhmann 1997, 71). To describe the meaning of a social

operation, the sociological observer observes a system's actual operation as a distinction or *form* that relates itself to latent possibilities. The ethnographer writes a story about the system as a decision maker, as a chooser that generates semantically based accounts for its own selections (Scott / Lyman 1968).

With some degree of sarcasm, Luhmann criticizes the »flatness« of researchers who endeavor to »precisely describe« social phenomena (2006, 52). We may see events as they occur in the field, but what we see becomes socially meaningful only through recursion: the emergent system must refer back to itself and to its own history to make sense of each of its operations. Observing a system reproduce itself with each of its operations is the essential problem of ethnography. This problem must be solved by all participants in communication, natives and ethnographers alike.

Luhmann wants to develop an informed respect for the two-sided forms that make it possible to produce and observe meaning in society. He does not claim to know what actual forms meaning will take, but he argues that all meaning requires the selective and recursive processing of a symbolically generalized unity of actuality and potentiality (Luhmann 1995, 94; 1997, 55, 360). How can we take Luhmann's theory of society into the field of qualitative research? As a preliminary, the ethnographer must learn to connect the *perception* of what actors appear to perceive with the observation of *understanding* as it is enacted in the flow of communication (Luhmann 2001, 235).

II. Subjects, Structural Couplings, and the Media of Society

Ethnographers have generally adopted sociology's traditional interest in explaining and understanding what *people* mean by what they do. This predilection for subjectivity, »mental standards,« or »reflective interpretations« (Jacob 1987; Bogdan / Biklen 1982), is partially to blame for the confusion described by Atkinson. Luhmann (1997, 1030) rejects the idea that the social can be understood by starting with subjects, and this is certainly one reason he has not appealed to qualitative researchers. Luhmann's preference for communication as the sociological unit of analysis – his »antihumanistic« shift – has met resistance. Due to their concern with subjectivity, qualitative researchers might quickly accept Eugene Halton's critique of Luhmann (1992, 35):

> Consider the systems theorist Niklas Luhmann, who introduced the idea of *autopoeisis* to account for self-generating systems. Here we see another contemporary avatar of the megamachine. The abstract, lifeless »systems« theory, because it excludes the living humans who comprise the social »system« as significant, ignores those natural capacities of life for self-making and self-generation. *Autopoeisis* must ignore *poeisis*, the human ability to create meaning in uniquely realized acts and works that transcend mere system per se. Therefore Luhmann's theory can be seen as part of

> the age-old dream to give life to the machine, in this case the machinelike system. His concept of *autopoeisis* is like the robot, android, or other automation fetishes of contemporary popular culture and movies, many of which involve (and even celebrate) a transformation of humans into automatons. Such sociological theories are not too distant from materialist artificial intelligence and »neural network« theories, which view human beings, to quote computer scientist Marvin Minsky, as highly systematic »meat machines.« I take these intellectual and cultural phenomena as further signs of the capitulation of autonomous life to the automaton.

Halton is apparently gripped by the »old European« semantic tradition that equates subjectivity with humanity. Individuals are all conscious beings, as it were, and this provides inherent dignity and equality to one and all. This humanistic tradition assumes that subjectivity provides a natural or transcendental basis for social integration and mutual understanding. For instance, when it comes to the interpretation of cultures, Clifford Geertz appeals to a »universe of human discourse« and »a natural order in human behavior« (Geertz 1973, 14). The ethnographer, because he is as human as his subjects, should have an easy time observing the natural order of their culture. This »flight to the subject« has helped intellectuals articulate a basis for social order and understanding in the modern era, but Luhmann asserts that it can be used only by those who do not take the concept of the subject seriously (1997, 1024-1025, 1030).

Luhmann does indeed assert that humans cannot communicate and that humans are restricted to the environment of the social system (1997, 105). However, he also points out that psychic systems are essential for the emergence of society. Communication is impossible without consciousness (1997, 103, 114). Luhmann adds that communication's dependence on the consciousness of human participants is »total;« human thought is implied in each and every social operation. While psychic systems process meaning as consciousness, social systems process meaning as communication. Both systems process meaning, but they remain operationally closed, autonomous, and functionally distinct.

Luhmann calls on sociologists to study how consciousness may be *structurally coupled* with communication, without the two types of systems sharing any contact. He specifies and celebrates the contribution subjectivity makes to society. Contrary to Halton's reading, it is not Luhmann's theory that transforms humans into meat machines. The power of intersubjectivity or collective consciousness, if it existed, would be far more likely to produce automatons. Intersubjectivity would shut down ethnography because there could be no more reports of surprises, no more introductions to strangers.

Humans are essential for society because they alone can perceive the sensual differences upon which spoken and written communication depend. Only humans can perceive that they are being perceived as participants in commu-

nication. This reciprocity on the level of perception guides participants in face-to-face interactions, a fact that has been well documented in the field (Goffman 1959; Cavan 1966; Humphreys 1970; Rosenhan 1973). Humans are not metaphysically or ontologically prepared to participate in communication; they must allow themselves to be self-conditioned by society. They must learn to order the noises they can make and detect. Halton believes that humans have »natural capacities« for »self making and self-generating« meaning. If communication did not cultivate and condition human thought, however, Luhmann asserts that consciousness could not begin:

> Intently conscious awareness is something completely different from communication, although every observer can conclude that communication without the working collaboration of consciousness cannot proceed. Indeed, consciousness could not have attained its current form and capacity for complexity without participation in communication. (2004, 161)

Insomuch as they are structurally coupled by communication media, consciousness and communication become, as Peter Fuchs puts it, »conditioned co-productions« (2004, 42). The social system and consciousness share a thoroughly symbiotic relationship, with no natural guarantee of survival for either partner. For ethnography, this is an exciting state of affairs.

According to Luhmann's media theory, participants in society learn to construct meaning by separating the energy of »form and medium« in a manner that is dictated and cultivated by society. Natives teach themselves to control and utilize meaningful differences by performing culture (not nature or humanity). Consequently, ethnographers should explain how symbolically generalized forms are actualized within a generally irritating – and thus perceptible – medium. Communication media reach across the operational closure of individual human minds, irritating nerves in a specific and structured manner, thereby allowing participants to inform themselves about the meaning of perceptions (see Luhmann 1997, 123). Of the external factors that limit the autopoiesis of society (temperature, light, air, gravity), consciousness enjoys a »privileged position« because it is the source of the perceptions upon which communication depends (Luhmann 1997, 114).

Luhmann's theory of media is heavily influenced by the work of Fritz Heider (Luhmann 1997, 195-202). Heider's insights, I suggest, provide a key foundation for a systems theoretical ethnography. Heider (1926; 1959) distinguishes between medium and form and loose and strict couplings. Social systems build themselves by observing the differences between the loose couplings that are potentially available from a medium and the strict couplings that may temporarily take on a fixed form. Systems theory enlists Heider to explain the difference between perception and understanding. Tight couplings are contingencies that constantly come and go, but they are the only phenomena that participants (and participant observers) can perceive. A particular tight coupling means

something to an observer because it is what it is *and* the observer knows that it could have been something else. The observer processes the meaning of the tight coupling as a selection attributed to external reference.

Structural couplings work for society because they have a basis in reality; a reality that humans can and must depend on as they participate in communicative practices (Luhmann 1997, 102-3). Luhmann adopts Heider's emphasis on the perceptibility of energy waves, of light and sound in particular. When coded by communication, sources of energy can be invested with two-sided forms of meaning. For example, waves of acoustic energy can represent language or music as the difference between organized and unorganized noise (Lee 2005a). Luhmann states that language is one of the most significant resources for ordering perceivable recursions (1997, 47). Spoken sentences take temporary form as tight couplings of words within the medium of language. As noise, perceived differences in sound can establish meaning in communication without connecting the thoughts of participants. In a similar manner, written language appears as a structural coupling of communication and readers by way of differences in light. Luhmann also refers to objects that, because they can be perceived, may be enriched with social meaning without involving language. As examples of such objects, Luhmann mentions sacred totems, coins, and soccer balls (1997, 48). Rituals may also serve as structural couplings between communication and conscious participants in society (Lee 2005b). Without sharing thoughts about the meaning of what they do, participants may watch one another perform according to cultured expectations in highly coordinated rituals.

Using constructs from systems theory, in particular the notions of operational closure, structural couplings, distinction, and communication media, ethnographers can focus their attention on the problem of observing meaning in society with more clarity and theoretical support. These notions should be used to explain how natives in the field participate in communication without violating the integrity of either consciousness or society. Luhmann's rhetoric against the prevailing anthropocentric assumption that humans comprise society is very strong, and may easily have led readers, such as Halton, to misunderstand his argument. With a qualified appreciation for human consciousness in mind, it becomes easier to see how systems theory can inform ethnography.

III. Towards an Ethnography of Recursion

The ethnographic observer appears as a second order observer of native participants in communication. Working in the field as a sort of scientifically conditioned voyeur, the ethnographer watches and describes participants in communication operating on the level of first order observers. The sociological observer emerges as a third order observer; one who re-writes ethnography

so that it makes disciplined reference to established sociological expectations. All three observers process their perceptions as first order observers, according to their own socially conditioned expectations. The sociological observer should oscillate between the self-reference of systems theory and the external reference of ethnography. Oriented by the social memory of the discipline, the sociologist imagines that redundancies may be observed and documented in the field, despite the incessant variety of social phenomena. Sociology expects to see the same things appear and reappear in different settings, even while hoping for surprises that might force it to accommodate its own expectations. As an irritating, fascinating, and corrective source of external reference, ethnographic observations challenge sociology to overcome its own self-reference and increase its ability to organize complexity. In the final section of this paper, I outline two general strategies for using the self-referential expectations of systems theory to stimulate and guide ethnographic observations that might, in turn, circulate back to condition the assumptions of theory.

Ethnographers might document the conditions under which structural couplings work or fail to work. Communication succeeds only when natives are able to detect and manage the informative differences that structural couplings represent. The »symbolic generalizations that stamp identities onto the flux of experience,« rely on the availability of a continuum of material or energy, a physically functioning world experienced by all participants (Luhmann 1995, 94; 1997, 102-3, 107). These same stimuli are potentially available to the senses of an ethnographer. To detect more than unorganized noise, of course, the ethnographer must be trained or conditioned as an adequately cultured observer of meaning. This is the same intricate self-training process that is required of natives, and represents what Geertz describes as »finding one's feet« (Geertz 1973, 13). A cascade of questions pertaining to structural couplings might be pursued in the field. What social resources do participants use as they learn to perceive, anticipate, and remember differences between tight and loose couplings? How can the material basis of a structural coupling be neutralized, disguised, or monopolized according to the strategic interests of a minority? How do participants in communication respond when preferred structural couplings fail to work? To what relative extent can the five senses become involved in the selectivity of understanding? How do interaction systems and organizations assess, monitor, and cultivate the requisite variety of potential members? In what concrete ways does society exploit human faculties for creating and perceiving noise? How do systems ensure that members have and keep the ability to perceive changes in the energy flow or material utilized by their established structural couplings?

With regard to structural couplings, perhaps the most important question for field researchers is to explain how communication trains participants to recursively connect what they perceive with what they might have perceived under different conditions. This question implies that the perception of a certain stimulus can represent meaning to an observer only if the observer has been

conditioned to relate that »tight« perception to a different one that might also have been expected. If we fail to understand the recursive nature of meaning, the impulses that energize structural couplings may be mistaken for »input« that determines a system's »output.« Meaning cannot appear as input, it may only appear as the differentiated selection of a cultured, external observer. Successful communication requires participants in society to consciously observe the *difference* between the manifest (marked) and latent (unmarked) alternatives provided by a generalized form. This builds the foundation for processing a perceived difference as if it were a praxis of meaning; the selective and intentional use of a form or code of meaning. Whenever observers construct meaning by linking their perceptions to a learned recursive distinction whose two-sided structure is symbolic and thus imaginary, the ethnographer has found a fertile field for research.

A social system emerges only as it observes; and it observes by drawing distinctions and making selections with the help of structural couplings with its environment. Thus, the ethnographer might work to reconstruct the boundaries, identities, and recursive forms constructed by the observing system in order to self-inform its ongoing operations with meaning. The ethnographer could describe how operationally closed conscious observers demonstrate their use of social solutions for the problem of double contingency by allowing their own possibilities to be limited by the self-referential schemes of communication (Luhmann 1997, 812-14). Working on the second order, the ethnographic observer describes practices in which autonomously operating first-order observers appear to be mutually conditioned or »interpenetrated« by society (Luhmann 1997, 108). The ethnographer's story portrays observers informing themselves with cultural limits in order to mutually anticipate, manage, and utilize one another's selections (see Goldenweiser 1913). Although participants in communication intentionally pursue solutions to their own problems, society only observes selections that are socially redundant and properly conditioned by its own forms. Ethnography provides the evidence of society using its recursive, generalized forms to organize the complexity of its participants.

Systems theory also expects that sociological observers may observe social systems creating and solving differentiated problems. Luhmann suggests that sociologists work to »grasp« the distinctive reality of a system, producing »a form of ordering vis-à-vis a reality that is also ordered« (1995, 58). The ordered reality of a social system may be sociologically described from the perspective of *operative functionalism*. What can we learn about a system if we imagine that its operations create and solve a particular problem with a particular solution? What can we gain by comparing and contrasting different problems and solutions? With this strategy, the ethnographer documents the system as an imaginary unity of different operations that self-describes its recurrent problem and accounts for its historical operations as if they were contingent but meaningful (functional) solutions.

Working in the field, the ethnographer initially works to describe the redundant functional code, the two-sided form, with which a system structures its recurring problem. In a certain setting, how do social participants buy and sell, learn and teach, defend and attack, or speak and listen? Will this man be included or excluded? Is this word sacred or profane? Is this food clean or not? Will this verdict be accepted as legitimate or not? Is this the right time and the right place for this display or not? Will this noise be accepted or rejected?

Regardless of their specific function, generalized forms will present themselves as unresolved, symmetrical dilemmas that require members to inform themselves by consulting supplemental resources. After identifying relevant operational forms or problems in use, the field worker may proceed to document semantic structures developed by a system in order to self-describe possible solutions and inform ongoing operations. Given an invariable, unresolved social form, participants require information that makes it possible to make and provide an account for having made a variable selection (Luhmann 1997, 377). As Luhmann maintains, systems rely on social memory to culture and inform the selections of participants (1997, 584-5). Social memory creates communicative dilemmas and themes that can be recalled and developed over time, enabling social connectivity between past and current operations. Participants learn to recognize and expect that themes will appear and reappear within given functional contexts. For example, past operational successes and failures may inform current decision making. Normative programs may also be developed to steer selectivity toward conditioned preferences (Luhmann 1997, 564-5). Social memory asserts itself into the flow of communication as fixated concepts, common sense, curriculum, wisdom, ideology, expertise, superstition, science, or other type of programmed self-reference. To document how social memory programs and supplements the resolution of communicative forms, ethnographers might describe conditions under which natives employ verse, proverbs, music, images, ritual, ornaments, dance, costumes, writing, or other structural devices to strategically manage one another's perceptions in order to reciprocally influence selectivity. In the style of ethnomethodology, ethnographers might search for the precious moments in which society appears unable to observe itself because its participants are trapped in uncertainty, lacking the supplements that can inform choice.

IV. Conclusion

Paul Atkinson is correct: ethnographers must pay more attention to documenting complexity, form, meaning, and the unlikely emergence of the social. I assert that Luhmann integrates all of these issues in *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*. The social practices ethnographers observe in the field are not meaningful because human subjects are involved in their enactment. Luhmann pinpointed

the human contributions to society, noting the technical ability and conscious motivation to make and perceive specific forms of noise. Structural couplings work by using organized forms of noise to structure and coordinate the closed operations of psychic and social systems. With its concept of meaning as a socially constructed difference, systems theory provides ethnographers with a demystified, yet more compelling account of subjectivity. Assessing Luhmann's influence on anthropologists, Ilana Gershon asserts:

> It is precisely the ways in which Luhmann's theory of social systems erases the person as an agent that can render Luhmann's writings significant for anthropologists… The systems that people on the ground face are increasingly structured as systems that erase selves… Luhmann offers a rigorous method for thinking about the systems that people are constantly encountering, and for discussing the often paradoxical ways in which people understand and practice their relationships to these systems. (2005, 99, 105)

Ethnographers have warned themselves that »grand theories« cannot empathetically describe the social lives of natives and that »logico-deductive« theories are value statements that bias one's ability to observe in the field (Glaser/Strauss 1967). These are justifiable concerns, and they are shared by systems theorists. Nonetheless, to be sociologically meaningful the observations of an ethnographer must establish connections to the discipline's own social memory. Empirical data may confirm, frustrate, or contest sociology's assumptions; but it cannot make any kind of scientific contribution without reference to theory. Of course, ethnographers need develop neither an appreciation for systems theory nor even sociology. They can continue to amass thick and thin descriptions of social phenomena that, as Atkinson remarks, »are not related systematically or in a principled fashion to any particular disciplinary, theoretical or substantive concern.« For its own sake, however, sociology needs both ethnography and theory; and it requires both to make constant reference to each other.

Luhmann's systems theory is promising for qualitative researchers because it is can be universally applied without presuming a grand narrative. Its theoretical constructs are transparent, integrated, precisely articulated, and systematically lead to further investigation. Systems theory provides participant observers with a needed theory of observation, an innovative definition of society as communication, and countless hints about the complexities – organized and unorganized – ethnographers should expect to find in the field. If qualitative researchers continue to dismiss systems theory, it is not because they have found a more useful theory.

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