

Niklas Luhmann.

Theories of Distinction: Redescribing the Descriptions of Modernity.

Edited, with an introduction by William Rasch.

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Stanford University Press continues its apparent project of making the works of Niklas Luhmann available to an English-speaking audience. With one volume in 1995, two in 1998, and three in 2000 but only one so far in 2002, perhaps the wave has crested. If not, then there is still plenty to work with since Luhmann was the author of some forty books and hundreds of journal articles. While he most consistently identified himself as a sociological systems theorist in his mature career, Luhmann was an academic omnivore, absorbing intellectual nourishment from the most diverse sources - a veritable mirror of postmodernism. I had some personal experience of his omnivorous tendencies in the late 1970's when I published an article arguing that what had typically been called "evolutionism" in the social sciences was really "developmentalism" i.e. individual growth, differentiation and functional integration rather than demographic multiplication, diversification with antagonistic social relationships possible as well as cooperative ones. Alone among the neo-functionalists he was collaborating with at the time Luhmann claimed to "get it". While never abandoning developmentalism (all narratives begin with "autopoiesis" or self-organization according to Luhmann — autopoiesis being the rallying cry of developmentalists in their on-again off-again war with evolutionists in biology), he added selection to his social theory. One of the interesting things about Luhmann was that he rarely left anything behind. He just kept adding: selection, communications, risk, constructivism, contingency, ecology etc. He resisted the label, but not all of the substance of postmodernism.

Given that Luhmann had become the most prominent German, and arguably, European social theorist by the time of his death, it is perhaps unfortunate that he has not found a fully competent champion in the English speaking world among sociologists. (This is not to say that there are not some very interesting essays by sociologists on Luhmann in English, e.g. Bechmann and Stehr 2002). However, Luhmann has not found an English-speaking sociologist able and willing to dedicate his or her career to choosing among his works, translating, explicating in context, etc. Instead, his legacy to English speakers lies in the hands of humanists who want to know "what comes after deconstruction" and who are often contemptuous of sociology and sociologists (e.g. see Knodt's preface to Luhmann 1995). I say "perhaps", because the result might be different. So far, we have no way of knowing.

The collection of essays on modernity by Luhmann under review is the second in English ostensibly on that subject. The essays in the first, *Observations on Modernity*, were written in the early 90's, apparently selected by Luhmann himself, and published in 1998. There, the themes we had come to expect from Luhmann were evident. The ghost in his sociological machine - the modern social *system* - self organizes, grows and develops as it differentiates into "different functions systems", distinguishes self from non-self, observes from within (including itself, and itself observing), communicates when irritated (e.g. about ecology), and while facing a contingent and risky future, like Luhmann himself manages to transcend all binary oppositions. If much of this sounds vaguely familiar, it should. Luhmann's ghost is an organism - a much *decorated* organism, but recognizably an organism. Luhmann declares it to be without purpose (references to which are merely the system's "self-simplifications") but of course, as described, it does at least implicitly have a purpose — its own growth and

development. As has often been observed, reading Luhmann is not for the critical. Rather it is for the *resigned*.

The more recent collection under review, *Redescribing the Descriptions of Modernity* is edited by Wm. Rasch, a professor of Germanic Studies and author of a previous book on Luhmann (Rasch 2000). The essays included appear to date largely from the mid to late 90's, and four are newly translated. It includes an introduction by Rasch placing Luhmann in selected philosophical traditions (although Weber is also included). While a tour-de-force in many respects, sociologists would have preferred one placing him in selected traditions in social theory. Many possibilities exist beyond my own interest in the mix of developmentalism and evolutionism to be found in Luhmann and in the history of social theory. For example, Luhmann's insistence that "modern society is world-society" has a context in social theory from Comte's belief that the basic social unit in positive societies will be the entire world all the way to current debates among globalizers, pro and con. Rasch places the essays in three groups on Husserl, Science and Modernity; Paradox and Observation; and Communication (with a final inclusion on critical theory). Again, the themes are mostly familiar - all observation (including second-order i.e. observing observation) takes place from within, Luhmann declares himself a "refined constructivist", society *is* communications, etc. - but there is a definite change of tone. The evolutionism is a little stronger, the developmentalism a little weaker - he comes close to claiming that selection in cognitive forms is a solution to the problem of knowledge in chapter six. In general, there is a less resigned, more confident tone in declaring the superiority of science over epistemology and in claiming to provide a new theory of communications. In fact, rare for Luhmann, he becomes downright combative in the final essay on critical theory. Where are answers to be found? "Not in Frankfurt." Whether the changes in tone reflect changes in Luhmann or the selection of essays remains to be seen if and when his last "big book", *The Society of Societies* is translated.

Neophytes should be warned that Luhmann is not for those who prefer an extended, linear, rational argument. Increasingly, his later work became (some might say degenerated into) an almost schizophrenic thought (albeit not word) salad. How could it be otherwise, given his famous card-shuffling method of working? Just to cite one example, in a particularly well-organized (for Luhmann) chapter on communications, the first sentence clearly states its goal as criticizing current communications theory and putting forth an alternative. A scientifically informed reader might then reasonably expect next something on the physics of Shannon and Weaver's uncertainty reduction, on the biology of animals "managing" (sending) and "assessing" (receiving) each others behaviour, on the semiotics of symbolically-encoded information, and on the sociology of meaning negotiation. Instead, we go off into psychology and sociology in general, autopoiesis-land again, then self-reference, and only eventually (although actually fairly quickly for Luhmann) do we get to his formulation of the three kinds of selection he sees involved in communication - of information, of utterances, and of understandings or misunderstandings. One should be cautious however about declaring that the German emperor has no clothes. In reading Luhmann, before long one inevitably experiences a "clang" as a thought resonates with something pre-existing but only half-formed, evoking a "now that's something worth thinking about", and you put the book down gently for awhile lost in thought. Yet, there is a definite risk that you will throw it down in disgust before you get that far, so be warned.

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Marion Blute
University of Toronto
marion.blute@utoronto.ca

Marion Blute teaches sociological theory to undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Toronto where she does research on evolutionary theory. Her most recent article on the subject titled "The Evolutionary Ecology of Science" will be available in a couple of weeks in the *Journal of Memetics*.

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