Constructivist social theories dealing with reflexivity and power: a critical reading of Luhmann
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Constructivist social theories dealing with reflexivity and power:
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Niklas Luhmann (the persona imagined or constructed within communicative systems; from now on: Luhmann) would have been annoyed, or have smiled, about a title in which the word “critical” appears so prominently. For he repeatedly mocks the easy reductionism of ideology-critiques and other attempts to see science in the most developed social systems as crucially affected by non-scientific phenomena. Truth is the medium specific to the reflexion on operations in what we call science, no other, certainly not power, morals, or money. Although I share the scepticism about the academic identity policy attached to the label “critical”, Luhmann’s dismissal provokes the attempt to reclaim it for an answer – one, for sure, internally expected by the communication system which is Luhmann’s system theory.

This preliminary remark mentions already the two axes along which the following paper will explore questions, some hopefully significant. First, it will discuss the role that a self-referential theory – or more generally, reflexivity – can play in and for the social sciences. The paper asks questions about the special characteristics of Luhmann’s constructivism, and seeks to assess to what extent it might strengthen the constructivist position in the meta-theoretical debates, which presently rage in IR. This meta-theoretical section will then, second, be followed by an assessment of his social theory proper. Here, a comparison with another reflective social theory, Bourdieu's field theory, shows some peculiar bias of Luhmann’s approach, which succeeds in exacting social power from its main questions altogether, a move which seems untypical for constructivism (and possibly for system theory, too).

I. Luhmann’s constructivism and the problem of reflexivity

How to write something on meta-theory these days without using the “c...” word (“constructo ergo sum” as Bill McSweeney said in despair at the 1998 ISA meeting in Minneapolis)? While reading Luhmann, yet another round seems, however, justified. If it is true, as argued elsewhere (Guzzini 2000) that “reflexivity” is a core characteristic of constructivist meta-theories, then Luhmann’s system theory is perhaps the most reflexive attempt to such a social theory. This section is meant to observe its assumptions.

In order to do this, let me briefly state what I assume to be core characteristics of constructivism (something which I do not expect to be uncontested - Luhmannians note the double negative). In my understanding (Guzzini 2000), constructivism is a meta-theory that can be characterised as

(1) being particularly sensitive to the distinction between the level of action (proper), the level of observation and the relationship between the two;

(2) having an epistemological position which stresses the social construction of meaning (and hence knowledge)

(3) having an ontological position which stresses the construction of social reality (and hence includes power).

This reading sees the recent interest in constructivism as stemming from the two turns that (part of) the social sciences have taken recently, the sociological and the
interpretivist turn. It tends to put it into a (German) hermeneutic tradition with a linguistic twist from (mainly American) analytical theory.

As a first cursory reading shows, Luhmann's theory fits easily the first two characteristics, but not the third. In Luhmann’s theory, the first characteristic is expressed by his distinction between observation and second-order observations. His entire epistemology, for which he claims the label “constructivist”, is an open critique of correspondence theories and thinks of truth in terms of system-inherent processes. Ontologically speaking, however, Luhmann’s position does not follow the classical hermeneutic distinction between natural and social worlds (or, at least, redefines it) and, perhaps consequently, appears to be simply agnostic with regard to “reality” (yet to be seen, below). Also, it might be part of the explanation why power plays such a curiously small role in the entire theory (see next section).

This section will try to review Luhmann’s assumptions trying to see where his particular system-theoretical turn might move us further in constructivist thought (or: I probe the Anschlußfähigkeit of Luhmann for constructivist theories).

1. Preface: System theory and the necessary link between a theory of communication, a theory of knowledge, and a sociology of epistemology

Why should IR scholars read Luhmann if there are only shattered pieces on “world-society”, drowned in a sea of highly abstract meta-theory and social theory? The basic answer is that, according to Luhmann, no so-called “empirical” analysis can be done without the latter. The levels of action, redefined as communication, and the different second order observations, done by communicative systems, are recursively linked. For Luhmann, his theory is, of course, “empirical” in that the observations of observations are “empirical”, albeit also strictly internal. By the same token, the “real” or “empirical” is intrinsically tied to what we know about the world. No reality without epistemology. In turn, this epistemology needs to be sociologically understood: any theory of knowledge must be coupled with an understanding of the socially differentiated subsystem of science. In this, Luhmann stays in the same radical sociological tradition as the Edinburgh School (Barnes), a sociological understanding of Kuhn, and French social anthropology (Bourdieu, Foucault).

Reading Luhmann means putting together the different circular arrows which link those levels – links which should express reverse directionality and simultaneity. Moreover, these levels (which should not be seen as necessarily hierarchical) are conceptualised in an often isomorphic manner which imposes a remarkable discipline and cohesion to the overall approach. This forbids a “pick-and-choose” strategy. In other words, whatever theory one says to apply – it is not Luhmann’s, if it is done in an eclectic manner, for the theory is exactly meant to excise eclecticism. The following will present some of these links and isomorphisms.

2. Epistemology: the system-internal construction of knowledge and the problem of reflexivity

Luhmann claims to have a constructivist position which differs both from a realist version of a correspondence theory of truth and from an idealist position whose epistemology
Guzzini: Reflexivity and Power in Luhmann

gives up any reference to reality (see respectively in particular 1990: 260ff. and 92f.).

Luhmann follows the path laid down by the Kuhnian/Wittgensteinian turn in the philosophy of science which both understands knowledge as theory-externally produced, and yet not as something to be subsumed under a position of epistemological idealism. But perhaps he is as close as one can be to this latter position.

Let me present it in terms of a positive research shift beyond Kuhn’s approach to paradigms (for a discussion of the latter, see Guzzini 1998: chapters 1 and 8). Kuhn’s paradigms are epistemic constructs, world-views (Weltanschauung), or a kind of scientific Lebenswelt, which pre-interpret the world, define the questions to be considered significant and the ways to approach them. Kuhn found this concept to be important since it struck a plausible Kantian cord in him. It relied on a Kantian root in his epistemology, something on Kuhn would never move, namely that concepts are the condition for the possibility of knowledge. Kant is given another linguistic twist insofar as these concepts are not a kind of subjective invention, but must, for their very existence, be intersubjectively shared. Kuhn, although perhaps less than Luhmann, de-personalises scientific work in its overwhelming routine, showing how findings are part of a background knowledge into which exchangeable scholars are socialised.

Besides the critique of subjective knowledge, the Kantian roots mean that a kind of pure induction is not possible. This idea, shared also by all logical positivists, is radicalised, however, in that Kuhn states even in the second edition of his book (Kuhn 1970 [1962]), that paradigms display an internal coherence which, in different words, derive from a holistic theory of meaning. Paradigms can fundamentally not criticise themselves. Criticism and reflection, indeed scientific evolution shows that the discussion between paradigms displays only a limited logical contact, and that paradigms are replaced in a kind of epistemic package-deal (gestalt-switch). His historical argument tries to prove this by showing that new paradigms have been accepted in the “exact sciences” before they actually had a superior heuristic content.

Now, it is not only interesting to know whether social sciences fit Kuhn’s vision of scientific evolution (as revolution), but what he contributes to social sciences itself (for this point: Barnes 1982). Kuhn’s solution to the greek-old debate between realism and nominalism is twofold: nominalists are right as long paradigms reign, but something external to the paradigm (which could include also logic, since it claims to be universal) must explain the shift from one to another (which, unfortunately, might only occur once every several centuries).

This produces a constructivist position which tries to stay away from the idealist circularity of nominalism. Kuhn does, of course, make the claim that all knowledge is constructed. His concept of paradigm, furthermore, includes as much a conceptual as a sociological reference for this construction when he claims that any study of the paradigm must start not from the subject-matter, but from the (academic) community for which it offers its identity (Kuhn 1970 [1962]: 180) – a sociological turn he certainly shares with Luhmann. Paradigms guide the search for knowledge very similar to the way Luhmann understands the internal expectations built up by systems in their code-steered autopoiesis.

But basically Kuhn leaves his epistemology agnostic (its blind spot, if you wish) as about what brings about such revolutions. All the talk about “anomalies” basically pushes this answer towards a mix of universal logic, peer pressure, and the social and political pressures which exist in its environment. It is not fortuitous, although perhaps not very helpful, that this has been called an instance of “mob-psychology” (Lakatos 1970). In principle, Kuhn’s solution produces a non-deterministic framework of analysis in which the dynamics of science are observable both from the “inside” (the paradigm) and from
the “outside” (in whether they shift or not). This reference to the “external” seems both theoretically ad hoc and yet (ontologically) plausible.

It is exactly this move which the more disciplined constructivist Luhmann refuses to take. Studying the social pre-requisites for paradigm shifts must ultimately “re-entry” into the scientific communication itself. In other words, even the way external pressures might influence paradigms is something whose understanding and effect is guided by the codes of the scientific system. With a bit of conceptual footwork, the difference between the two can easily be reduced insofar as Kuhn can be interpreted in a Luhmannian way.

But perhaps more is at stake in the effects of adopting Luhmann’s system theory for doing the job. Should Kuhn’s theory be allowed to become part of the self-description of the sciences, the scientific system must allow the possibility for system theory to be replaced in a next package deal. Indeed, the knowledge of the sociology of epistemology should accrue a sense of reflexivity which renders the system, here: system theory, open to change, including its own demise. What seems, however, the effect in Luhmann’s theory is simply that once we accept it, we cannot think beyond the system, beyond our theory. Instead of raising our reflexivity about our theories in the sciences, Luhmann’s move consists in integrating all reflexivity into the theory. Taking Kuhn seriously produces a constructivist epistemology which is agnostic about change, and hence able to allow its own unravelling, although it cannot properly “explain” it. In contrast, Luhmann can explain (observe) everything, yet only through an operative closure, a “no-beyond”, which contradicts the very re-entry of constructivism into the self-representation of science.

3. Ontology: agnosticism about the world and another problem of reflexivity

The closest we get to what is called God in theological writings, is the “world” in Luhmann's theory (Rossbach 2000). And as classical faith is of no longer avail for the divine, also the scientist cannot but remain sceptical about the world out there. Yet, since also scepticism is a paradoxical position, the basic outcome in Luhmann's ontology is one of agnosticism, not of atheism. The world (God) out there cannot be excluded (important double negative), but we do not know it.

Such a position is the logical outcome of the epistemology above. Already this is a point worth mentioning. There has been a debate, within International Relations and elsewhere, about the implications of putting either the ontological or epistemological horse in front of the meta-theoretical cart. Epistemological approaches tend to stress the internal construction of meaning and knowledge and hence produce an agnostic ontology. This applies in particular to Friedrich Kratochwil (Kratochwil 1988; Kratochwil 1989), although the shortest sentence expressing it was coined by Onuf (1989: 38): “we construct worlds we know in a world we do not”. Inversely, those who try to start from ontology, usually reduce constructivism to a form of idealism (Patomäki and Wight 1999).

But this logical outcome seems to contradict my third component of constructivism mentioned above, namely that constructivists are not only interested in the social construction of meaning (and hence knowledge), but also in the construction, the “making”, of the social world. One can even argue that the sudden success of constructivism is linked to the capacity of Alexander Wendt (1992) in particular, to convince his fellow US scholars that any theory of IR which is worth keeping after the end of the Cold War, must be able to account for social change in front of material continuity (see also Kratochwil and Koslowski 1994). The message is straightforward.
International relations are part of a social world, which in itself depends on the representations actors make of it. Not only our understanding, but through that and other actions informed by it, this very world is constructed. Inversely, this reliance on ontology, however, has been charged for not taking the role of language serious enough both at the level of action and observation (Zehfuß 1998).

Luhmann does not deny an effect of observation on the world. Observations change the world, in which observation occurs (Luhmann 1990: 75). But here his epistemological constructivism falls short of going all the way to social constructivism. The reasons are twofold.

First, Luhmann does actually not follow the interpretivist turn which seems to have characterised much post-positivist social theory recently. The interpretivist move necessarily involves a distinction between the social and the natural world, and hence also for the sciences which deal with them (for this, see the second point below). This is outside of his theoretical apparatus. His theory must assume an isomorphism between different “living” systems, biological and social. This move tends to “bring to live” physical systems and apparently (?) forces him to effectively dissolve the subject through the distinction between a psychological and a social system. In other words, he must look for similarities where the hermeneutic scholar looks for differences. A sometimes biological theory of systems sits uneasily with a social theory of knowledge. As a result, there is no ontology of intersubjectivity, indeed this needs to be deconstructed. There is no language, only communication.

Second, and therefore, he has no conceptual apparatus to apprehend what Ian Hacking has called the “looping effect” (most recently, see Hacking 1999). By this, Hacking refers to the effect representations can have on self-representations which then feedback into social communication. It might not affect much the stone, whether it is repeatedly called a God. If believed, that call will change the behaviour of other agents, but it will not change the stone itself. With human beings, however, such calls might affect self-ascriptions, i.e. the famous identity of an agent and hence social interaction. A clearly identifiable change has happened, one visible only with a less agnostic ontology.

Or perhaps not. Although I will not force myself, I can imagine that there are ways to use Luhmann’s theory to show that this change is itself only a different representation within the communication (the social) system. But lest I be convinced of the opposite (the workshop would be helpful here), this redescription seems less plausible, more ad hoc, then one which is based on some ontological distinctions typical for interpretivists. Surely more to follow.

The basic crux is perhaps Luhmann’s suspiciousness of everything which might help the resurrection of the buried subject. After having hammered so many nails into that coffin, Luhmann will not flinch in front of my reference to looping effects which have something to do with the self-reflexivity of subjects, and hence the reflexivity of the social world. Yet, some will find it suspicious that this form of reflexivity gets no (re-)entry into Luhmann’s system theory (more below).

4. Postface: the isomorphism between the evolution of social systems and system theory

One important reason for claiming a special place for system theory in today’s sociology is the fact that it seems to best describe, indeed mirror, the differentiation of modern societies where sub-systems have established themselves, such as the economic system, science, or politics.
And indeed, Luhmann's texts usually start from the logic of forms and try to show how such sub-systems can create themselves in the first place. In other words, the genesis of these sub-systems, their re-entry to produce operational closure is usually presented before we move on to the functioning of those systems, their reproduction according to specific codes and media. The non-sensitivity to the environment is both cause and effect of such a closure and its autopoiesis.

Within this historical evolution, particular changes are given special relevance. For the system of science, for instance, Luhmann stresses the importance of writing and of printing. Following this, Luhmann claims that a working theory of evolution must assume a complex understanding of media of communications and of systems (1990: 187).

Yet, curiously enough, those passages give a status to historical descriptions (this is how Luhmann's calls it himself) which seems to undermine his entire approach. For, if at times it reads as if his complex theory is needed to understand evolution, it also reads as if evolution prompts us to model a complex theory like his.

There are several passages in which the historical evolution of the world and of social systems appear to have a telos, respectively the creation and reduction of complexity. There, the functional pre-requisites of evolutionary selection are read symmetrically to the functional pre-requisites of a system theory. Let me just quote those related to media of communications:

Es scheint dieses Folgeproblem der Schrift gewesen zu sein, das durch neue evolutionäre Errungenschaften, eben die symbolisch generalisierten Kommunikationsmedien, wenn nicht gelöst, so doch renormalisiert wird (1990: 179) [It appears to have been this problematic effect of writing, which newer evolutionary achievements -- exactly those symbolically generated media of communication -- have at least re-normalised, if perhaps not solved.]

Or:
Symbolisch generalisierte Kommunikationsmedien entstehen jedoch nur, wenn in der allgemeinen gesellschaftlichen Kommunikation Sonderprobleme auftauchen, die sich nur durch besondere Mittel lösen lassen. Was ist dann aber das Sonderproblem, das zur Ausdifferenzierung eines spezifischen Mediums für Wahrheit führt? (1990: 216) [Symbolically generated media of communication are only created if there appear special problems in the general social communication, problems, which can only be solved by particular means. Which is, then, the special problem, which leads to the differentiation (?) of a specific medium for truth?]

This is curious, since Luhmann’s theory wanted to shed all functionalist ballast in the form of functional teleologies and explanations. With this move, systems have no aim and hence systemic pre-requisites cannot function as causes for selections. Indeed, the theory is said to be only insofar functionalist as it uses the method of functional equivalence. Yet, here, at least so it seems in my reading of it, we have a classical cybernetic approach in which order/equilibrium is disturbed (by the evolution to ever higher complexity) and needs to be re-established by features which reduce the effect of complexity (for the political system, see Deutsch 1966; for foreign policy analysis, see Steinbruner 1974). This might be not the classical structural-functional theory, but it is more than simply functional equivalence.

More importantly, perhaps, it is then no longer sure in which direction the argument is allowed to function. Can a constructivist meta-theory unproblematically refer to a particular interpretation (description) of history for justifying its social theory? Of course, history is itself seen as a (self-) representation of a communicative system. But this is really a total circle through which social theorising becomes an exercise in method,
re-describing anything what may in terms of the needs of the theory. The theory itself can certainly not justify this by reference to history, if this is just a self-representation.

This problem is compounded by the repeated references to findings in behavioural and natural sciences, as if their findings can be simply taken for what they are and therefore used for justifying the development of categories in system theory. Often, an (assumed) limited isomorphism of natural systems with social systems is used to justify particular features of the social theory, so, for instance, the argument about child psychology to prove that communication is prior to intersubjectivity (1990: 18-19, see also another unproblematic reference to psychology on p. 200, fn. 52).

In other words, system theory is still in need of justifying itself to anybody who is not yet converted. References to a communicatively constructed history, continuously reconstructed to meet the requirements of system theory construction, or to findings in the behavioural and natural sciences (biology) which are not always further problematised, will not do.

II. Luhmann’s social theory and the disappearance of power

According to my understanding of constructivism, Luhmann’s approach stands apart for two related characteristics in particular. First, his ontology does not allow for the (social) construction of the social world. Relatedly, and as I notice earlier, such an understanding is usually coupled to a prominent concept of power which usually provides the constructivist link between the level of action and the level of observation (or first and second order observation). Therefore, it might be hardly surprising that my reading will find Luhmann’s approach to power wanting.

Yet, this critique stands for a much larger discussion of his actual social theory and therefore, the following will dwell on it. Indeed, my argument will be that Luhmann’s social theory consistently and consciously underplays the phenomenon of power. This is a theoretical choice which can, but also needs to, be justified. For I will show in a comparison with Bourdieu that constructivist-inspired approaches can handle it in a very different way. Through Bourdieu, I will observe Luhmann’s theory.

1. Power as a medium of communication, or: how to eventually tie power to one system

How can I say that Luhmann’s theory makes power disappear when he wrote a whole book about it (Luhmann 1975)? The move is the result of two theoretical decisions. First, Luhmann defines power as a medium of communication which, in his move to autopoiesis, is increasingly tied to one and only one social system, namely politics. Second, he moves away from classical stratification theories in sociology by levelling all social systems: the political system is removed from its prior or superordinate place.

None of these moves alone would diminish the importance of power, only both together. To the contrary, keeping only one of the two theoretical decisions would potentially increase the role of power in (and for) social theory. Hence, Luhmann’s first move does not exclude a structural coupling which privileges the conversion of power into other media (as discussed in Luhmann 1975: 101ff.). His second move alone would be similar to Foucault’s diffuse conceptualisation of power which wants to understand “power without the king” (Foucault 1977), too, but which would therefore
tend to see it almost everywhere.

*Power as a medium of communication (the interactionist-functionalist phase)*

It is not easy to summarise Luhmann’s approach to power. For the major book, *Macht*, which was (little) revised in its second edition in 1988 (no preface, no new literature after 1975), is heir of a literature in social science heavily influenced by approaches which are in potential tension to his own later one. This does not need to mean that there has been a huge shift in his writings, but reading the revised edition of 1988 seems to show that Luhmann’s earlier writings could have gone also in a different direction than his *Social Systems*, which, in itself, is nothing unexpected for system theory which stresses evolutionary contingency.

Luhmann bases his understanding of power mainly on the social exchange and community power literature, which was prominent then (and to which he gives a communicative twist, see below). This is interesting, since this type of literature is meta-theoretically incompatible with his communicative approach at the time. This literature defines power as a relational concept in which the terms of individual preference rankings, foregone alternatives, sanctions and cost analysis play an important role. A *relational*, not to be confused with a *relative*, concept of power implies that power does not reside in capabilities or sources, but in the relationship between actors. Only by knowing the individual preferences, by knowing the alternative options of both actors, can we impute whether their relations have been characterised by power. They always are, if the cost analysis in the decision of ego have been affected by actions of alter (Luhmann still uses the ego-alter concepts in 1975/88).

As such, and here Luhmann explicitly follows Dahl (1968) power is a causal concept. Power only exists when alternative actions would have been possible. Hence, power is also necessarily a counterfactual concept. Luhmann also accepts that power not only resides in those instances in which a visible “will” has been broken, something Peter Morris has called later the empiricist “exercise fallacy” of power (Morriss 1987: 15), but that it exists also where particular wills are never formed in the first place, something which has become famous as the “third dimension of power” (Lukes 1974).

The relational concept of power leads into Luhmann’s use of power as a medium of communication, which is part and parsons of structural functionalism. There, media of communication are seen to have been developed as a response to the rising complexity of modern societies. Since the development of written communication and its accrued distance between information, understanding and acceptance/refusal, symbolically generated media of communication become necessary. They create motivations for acceptance of communication in order to avoid that this distance is perceived as making communication too complicated, or even impossible (Luhmann 1990: 179).

In other words, these media are a supplementary institution of language, namely a code of generalised symbols that steer the transmission of selection impulses. In order to allow communication to start, stabilised expectations are needed. Media of communication develop specifically generated codes that equalise (Luhmann 1975:12) expectations of still independent remaining selection processes. “Kommunikationsmedien kombinieren mithin Gemeinsamkeit der Orientierungen und Nichtidentität der Selektionen.” (Luhmann 1975:8). In this context, symbolisation (symbols, symbolic codes) refer to the facilitated expression of very complex constructed interactions that make the latter which we can experience (erlebbar) as a unity (Luhmann 1975: 32).

Power is a symbolically generated medium of communication which presupposes that both partners see alternatives whose realisation they want to avoid. “Thus power is present only when the participants define their behaviour in correspondence to a
corresponding medium of communication” (Luhmann 1990 [1981]: 157). The realisation of power (Machtausübung) arises, when the relation of the communication partners to their alternatives to be avoided (Vermeidungsalternativen) is such that ego wants to avoid them relatively more than alter. Power as a medium links up one combination of alternatives to be avoided with another, yet preferred one. This must be visible to the communication partners. For Luhmann (1975: 22) the code of power communicates an asymmetrical relation, a causal relationship, and motivates the transmission of selections of action from the more powerful to the less powerful one. It is based on the control of access to negative sanctions (Luhmann 1990 [1981]: 157).

Hence, in 1975 we have a hybrid approach where power is (1) merely seen as a reduction of contingency (indeed double contingency since we have to think of both alter and ego) which sounds straightforward interactionist, and (2) its very character as medium of communication is embedded in a functionalist (small) theory of history. Moreover, Luhmann (1975: 11) explicitly accepts the theory-driving analogy to the concept of cause (“die theorieleitende Kausalvorstellung”), even though he wants to use it in a more abstract way.

Power as a medium of communication (the purely communicative phase)

The shift to a more coherent system-theoretical approach passes via a communicative phase which is the one closest to social constructivism. The twist occurs through an ingenious, because heuristically fruitful, move: power does not cause a certain outcome, but regulates the communicatively generated attribution of causality (or: asymmetry) (Luhmann 1990 [1981]: 157). Hence, power is socially constructed through communication. Still more constructivist, Luhmann (1990 [1981]: 163) even argues that the process of the causal attribution of power, in turn, has an effect on the actual relationships of power.

It is in this communicative vein, that his earlier writings become retrospectively more coherent. Moreover, his conceptualisation of power is used in very interesting ways, at least for a constructivist. Let me mention in particular the very plausible idea of substitutes of power. Since the exact weighing of alternatives in a relational concept of power (double contingency) is hardly possible, communication develops substitutes for the medium (with the same function of stabilising expectations) which, in turn, become a symbolically generated code of power. There are substitutes in the form of reductions like hierarchies (presupposing already a ranking); history (attributing power through past events), related to this: prestige/status and the example of previous significant events; finally, rules deriving from contracts. In all these cases the direct communicative recourse to power is replaced by a reference to symbols, that oblige normatively all parties and take account of the presupposed power ranking. In IR, this opens up the huge field of the study of reputation, accepted substitutes like nuclear weapons and whether they might still work, the effect of collective memory, indeed discourse analysis of historical metaphors/symbols like Vietnam or Munich for decision-making.

Luhmann also argues that would science become able to measure power, this would destroy these substitutes and hence affect reality itself. He feels confident, however, that whatever scientists would come up with would be another set of substitutes and not a real measure of power – and that politics would blissfully ignore it (Luhmann 1975: 10-11).

In IR, it was the very absence of a consensus on the practical level, however, that has been a constant concern for many practitioners and academics during the Cold War. Kissinger, for instance, deplores that with the advent of nuclear weapons the relationship between power and politics has been loosened, and that power has become both more awesome and more “abstract, intangible, elusive” (Kissinger 1969: 61). In his eyes, it was
crucial that diplomats came to a shared understanding of power, independent of its actual use. To make the traditional balance-of-power politics and diplomacy work, the central coordinates, references and symbols, such as national interest or power, must have a translatable meaning. For compensations cannot be used to ease tensions if their value is deeply contested; nor can balancing diplomacy have its effect of moderating conflict if there is no common understanding of the point of equilibrium (for a longer discussion, see Guzzini 1998: chapter 7). In a similar vein, Daniel Frei (1969) urged his peers in his inaugural lecture to help politicians to come up with a generally (i.e. socially or communicatively) accepted measure of power. Such a measure, which implicitly acknowledges a constructed nature of power, would help to stabilise diplomacy in the Cold War. “Before diplomats can count, they must agree on what counts” (for more, see Guzzini 1998: 231ff.).

**Fighting the overextension of the concept of power – and going too far**

As mentioned earlier, Luhmann’s concept of power was to be heavily reduced in its reach by two moves together. He ties power increasingly to one sub-system, politics, which, in turn, is no longer given prominence among the sub-systems of society. I cannot judge what move came first, but the turn to his biology-inspired autopoiesis, and not a kind of hermeneutic reproduction, might require both.

Luhmann started with a very wide concept of power, which, as all symbolically generated media of communication, is “omnipresent” in society. Since this is far less the case in his later writings might warrant a central (and lengthy) quote. Opening a chapter on the “social relevance of power”, Luhmann writes:

> Like language, symbolically generated media of communication have one necessary systemic reference: society. They pertain to problems of the whole society, and regulate constellations, which are possible at any time and anywhere in society. They cannot be restrained and isolated into sub-systems, in the sense, for instance, that truth would play a role only in science, or power only in politics. There are constellations in connection with doubly contingent selectivity, which cannot be eliminated out of the “horizon of possibilities” (Möglichkeitshorizont) of human interaction. Wherever humans communicate with each other, there exists the probability of a transfer of selection patterns in one form or another. (A different assumption would be a good sociological definition of entropy.) Wherever human communicate with each other, there is the probability that they orientate themselves by taking the possibility of a mutual harming into account, thereby having influence on each other. *Macht ist ein lebensweltliches Universale gesellschaftlicher Existenz.* (Luhmann 1975: 90, my translation where I could)

The move to autopoiesis as a central concept of systems implied for Luhmann, that every reference to humans had to be replaced by physical, psychic or social systems. That move which is perfectly coherent within his theory has, however, rather profound consequences for the conceptualisation of the media of communication. In particular, and exactly as admonished by Luhmann before, it ties specific media closer to “their” sub-systems. This results, first, from the need to have a code-steered autopoiesis which occurs in operative closure. This code, in turn, is a binary expression of the media of communication. The two concepts have been inextricably connected (Luhmann 1990: 196). Second, dissolving the human behind systems means that the link from one subsystem to another can no longer be made by communicative interactions which might carry several media of communication at the same time (power and money, for instance). It must be done through a new concept, structural coupling which is again a system-intern representation of a certain part of the environment. This reinforces the “inner logic” of the code.
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It also undermines any way of understanding communication as a hermeneutic process for which language is crucial – and which resolve some of the apparent paradoxes with which Luhmann justifies his approach. Let me give as an example his argument with regard to pluralism in his chapter on world society. He argues that different culturally defined systems in the world cannot be understood by observers who accept this pluralism. Since the observer cannot have a view from somewhere, no Archimedean point, independent of any of these cultures, pluralism must accept an “in-the-world” observation which is at the same time “out-of-the world” and hence becomes self-contradictory. But this argument only follows when a non-hermeneutic understanding of understanding is assumed. In this, the argument recalls the classical rebuttal by Bernstein (1983) that Kuhn’s incommensurability thesis (and its related holistic theory of meaning) is not, or less of, a problem for those who conceive of the observer as translator, both in and out of the language. viii Similarly, German sociology in the tradition of Schutz (1962) has tried to conceptualise the observer as stranger defined by being both in and outside of the community. ix There is no a priori to believe that the paradox is better resolved though time (observation of observation...), as Luhmann repeatedly proposes.

In any way, once power is tied to the political system and the latter is given an equal, but mutually autonomous place in Luhmann’s social theory, little is left of power’s omnipresence in practice. This produces a series of debatable implications for his social theory, as the next section will try to show.

2. Was there no alternative?

There is something to be said in favour of avoiding omnipresent concepts. The risk is great that this presence comes at the expense of any positive heuristic. This risk is all the greater as the underlying power concept was meant to be causal. Omnipresent causes produce tautologies.

But this was not the only way out. x Nor are all the implications sociologically plausible. Let me only briefly mention several social theories which have dealt with similar problems in a different way and which have perhaps better categories at hand for a reflexive study of society. All are in the sociological tradition. None of them is methodologically individualist. They do, or could be made to, espouse constructivist meta-theoretical principles. In contrast to Luhmann, however, they deconstruct the classical vision of the subject in a way that it does not disappear. Bourdieu’s approach, in particular, offers a perhaps more coherent conceptualisation of power – and, for sure, a conceptual apparatus which is empirically more accessible. Via a discussion of different conceptualisations of power, I hope to indicate where one does not need to follow the Luhmannian path.

A micro-sociology of power (Foucault)

Conceiving power in a more diffuse way, seeing it as a possibly productive phenomenon, could also mean a radical move to a micro-sociology of the body as in Foucault. This argument is important, because Luhmann’s solution to debase the subject is not the only one, and might have a high cost in terms of empirical analysis (dare I say, also in ethics? See Diez 2000). True, both Foucault and Luhmann so-to-speak “horizontalise” social order. Both deconstruct the modern subject. Yet there is all the difference. In Foucault the subject disappears under the weight of its conditioning. Hence, it is, paradoxically, forcefully restated: l’assujettissement focuses on the subject as
(empirical) locus where empowering and disempowering relations meet. As such, it is not necessarily an anti-humanistic concept, although it questions the autonomy of modern (wo)man. In Luhmann, the subject is a pure ascription and hence disappears behind the social system of communication, being cut into a cognitive, physical, and social system. In other words, whereas Foucault tends to oversocialise the subject, looking at the way the identity and even the very body are *assujetti*, Luhmann “systematises” it away.xi

*Stratification – after all (Bourdieu)*

Similarly, there is no logical deduction from the idea that subsystems have become more equal to the idea that hierarchy, or social stratification, is necessarily a concept to be heaped on the dustbin of history. Luhmann writes that functional differentiation has turned the world “acentrical” and “heterarchic” (Luhmann 1997: 157). But from there, it does not stringently follow that power has lost its role.

Luhmann seems to assume that if the political system is no longer hierarchically superposed over the others, hierarchy itself diminishes (I might be wrong here. I proceed as if I were not). Luhmann explicitly says that principles of inclusion/exclusion have become more important than classical stratification principles. This is in line with his evolutionary vision moving from stratified to functionally differentiated societies. But I wonder, whether this critique is not simply based on naming things differently.

Recent power research specifically in IPE is trying to come to grips with an international society which is increasingly stratified, exactly because of the principles of inclusion/exclusion. Similarly to Luhmann, there is much literature on the diffusion, if not evaporation of power (Strange 1995; Strange 1996), if by that is meant a control or steering capacity, an assessment akin to, among others, Luhmann’s vision. And interestingly enough, Susan Strange takes a functionalist view in many regards. She argues that classical state functions are taken over by others than the political system, by mafias and multinational enterprises. Her assessment is one of the privatisation of power. I could imagine that this fits Luhmann’s approach.

There are, however, two conceptual differences to Luhmann’s approach which might be consequential. On the one hand, Susan Strange would de-link the analysis of particular functions from the sub-systems to which there might have been attached before: political (and not only those) functions can be taken over by economic and societal networks, and, why not, transsocietal epistemic communities. As a result, even on the classical political functions, territoriality plays less of a role. Using an older terminology, one could say, that on the input functions, national institutions are the main part of what there is – democratic representation being a pure, but special case – but on the output functions, this is no longer the case. This means, that whereas functional differentiation still applies, the organisational setting can no longer be taken for granted. In times of change, this becomes actually an empirical question. In again other words, Luhmann’s functional differentiation, tied to specific historically contingent communication systems, should be revised in a more general re-assessment of the functions that can be differentiated in a society. It opens the question whether operational closure presupposes institutions of the classical kind, or could in itself become more abstract.

The second difference concerns the fact that some actors or networks could perfectly be present and influential in many of the heterarchies. This would be achieved, not through the convertibility of media of communication (or the fungibility of power resources), but because some actors control different types of capital which, in the now more fluent boundaries, they can “cash in”. But this would, again, mean that we need some concept at hand with which we can link different sources of power to different systems. Then, we would be able to see that
the very existence of such a heterarchy could be analysed as part of a hierarchical system since it systematically reproduces inclusion and exclusion.

There are social theories around which have handled these matters. I do not dwell on one social theory which seems an obvious candidate, namely Manuel Castell’s massive approach to the information society (Castells 1996). It offers a theory of society which focuses, as Luhmann does, on communication/culture and economy as globalising sub-systems in a wealth of conceptual innovation and empirical analysis. One might like this or not, but there is a strong, both theoretically and empirically based competitor, already out there. The final view is both a diffusion of power which, however, is not horizontally organised.

Another possible inspiration is Bourdieu’s field theory. A field stands both for a patterned set of practices which suggests competent action in conformity with rules and roles, and for the playing (or battle) field in which agents, endowed with certain field-relevant or irrelevant capital, try to advance their position. This social subsystem is, however, not mainly defined by its functionality as compared to the entire system, but relies intrinsically on a historically derived system of shared meanings which define agency and make action intelligible. Its boundaries are an empirical question. Being historical, fields are open and change over time. But their inertia, their habitus, their internal (open) logic, what Bourdieu calls the sens referring both to meaning and direction produces an inward looking reproduction which can take over at least many of the features of Luhmann’s autopoiesis.

Bourdieu’s theory of stratification is based on his theory of capital. Here is perhaps the biggest difference with Luhmann, because these forms of capital both link up different fields, and set them apart, since their role and efficacy are different from one to another. Bourdieu distinguishes between economic, social, and cultural capital (symbolic capital being a fourth but slightly different notion). Agents are endowed with different amounts of these capitals. Conversely, their capital has not always the same efficacy depending on the context in which it is used. Having lots of economic capital might not be of much use in being well positioned as an artist, although it certainly influences the way the artistic field is structured. Indeed, to some extent the very identity of these fields/subsystems is closely connected to the particular mix of the there relevant capital.

Within the overall structure, and depending on the level of differentiation of a society, different fields (champs) exist within a society. Fields, like the artistic field, the academic field, are the specific contexts within which practices take place. Fields correspond to a network of positions, a set of interactions with a shared system of meaning. They give meaning to agency. They are the playgrounds where agents realise individual strategies, playing within, and thereby openly reproducing, the rules of a given game (as defined by the specific set of capital most valuable for holding power within the field).

The practices of agents in these fields are inspired by taken for granted beliefs, the so-called doxa, which Bourdieu defines also as the very presuppositions of the field. Doxa refers to the quasi-perfect correspondence of a socially constructed, yet objectified order (structure and fields) and the subjective principles of its organizations that agents share. It is in this spontaneous sharing of the common-sense in which the natural, but also the social world appears as self-evident (Bourdieu 1977: 164). This concept is his empirically narrower translation of the German Lebenswelt.

Such an analysis relies heavily on the study of field-specific sets of dispositions, called the habitus. Bourdieu defines the habitus as a product of history which in itself (through effecting certain practices) produces history. It guarantees the active presence of past experiences through providing schemes of perception, thought and action which tend to reproduce practices in conformity with the field throughout time (Bourdieu 1980: 91).
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The habitus functions like the materialisation of collective memory. Comparable to Kuhn’s “paradigm”, it is a disposition to act, perceive and think in a particular way. It is the obvious link to a more constructivist theory both at the level of action, and, since the scientific field works in a similar way, for the level of observation.

The logic of the field also implies that the dispositions are not themselves perceived as the result of a particular history; they are, as Bourdieu says, the “forgetting of history that history produces”, or, in other words, collective memory that appears as the “natural” way of doing, perceiving and thinking things. Dispositions lead to the smooth reproduction of exactly those assumptions that define the autonomy of the field. This is Bourdieu’s sens pratique which means both meaning/sense (of action and practices) and drive/direction (of the open reproduction of fields). It is important to note that this ‘reproduction’ is neither closed nor mechanistic (for a synopsis of Bourdieu’s field theory, see figure 1, adapted from Guzzini 1994: 244).

Fields are not there forever, and dispositions even less. Besides changes in the overall social structure, there are different internal barriers through which the mechanic reproduction of the field can be inhibited. There is, first, the very passage from collective memory to the schemes of thought and action. Like language which shows the generation of much new thought and understanding, even the strongest adherence to established practices cannot

Figure 1 A synopsis of Bourdieu’s chapter 3 in Le Sens Pratique (my translation) determine the use individuals make of their past. Secondly, the dispositions are realized in a context which is different from the one in which they were formed. The bigger the perceived difference, the greater the possibility that dispositions may change. Finally, there are all the interferences that can exist for the fact that the same agent is part of different fields. Here, it depends very much on the “discipline” the field (as, for instance, an academic discipline) succeeds in imposing on its participants not to “steal” and transpose dispositions from other fields (arts or politics, for instance). Hence, it depends on the degree of “autism” of the field’s ability to refract the influence of other fields. These questions can only be established empirically.

This conceptualisation is a sociological translation of socialisation processes that take
place not on the individual level via competition and strategic learning, but on a social
level where the agents` identity is related to groups. It is a revised version of a Weberian
status group approach. Cooperation or common action is hence not necessarily the result
of choice. Practices are (also) the result of the orientations given by the habitus and the
structure of the field as a system of authorisations and punishments (Bourdieu 1982: 14).
In other words, identity (agency), interests and strategies are field-specific and can be
only understood after a prior analysis of the field itself.

Such a theoretical framework has several advantages. First, the non-strictly materialist
definition of capital allows for field-specific analysis and for linking up fields. For this,
however, Bourdieu still keeps a concept of an agent, even if individualists might find it
over-socialised. Moreover, it also allows for an understanding of hierarchy within and
across fields which can coexist with a diffusion of centers of power. Heterarchy is no
contradiction to hierarchy. For the effective control over outcomes might diminish
unequally among different fields and respective agents. Related to this, it allows to see
power relations in every singly field, without, however, reducing all relations to them.
Finally, this allows to have a more contingent theory of fields/subsystems which is not
deduced from a teleology of complexity.

Let me conclude this section with a further advantage illustrated by an example. In his
earlier book on power, reputation is seen as a substitute for the medium power. In his
study of science, reputation is used as a substitute of truth. Whereas Luhmann tries to
keep the implications of that similarity at bay (coming to sometimes rather naive
statements about the working of science), Bourdieu would spell them out. On the
international level, Bourdieu`s approach would make it obvious to study the fields of
non-territorially bound communities, such as for instance, Susan Strange`s “international
business civilisation” (Strange 1989). In other words, his approach has been used in
extensive, and empirically very detailed studies of different fields
(for a discussion in IPE, see Leander forthcom. 2000). It offers a conceptual apparatus
which is perhaps empirically more fruitful than Luhmann`s which might be a tick too
high on the “ladder of abstraction” (Sartori, ).

Epilogue

Reading Luhmann gives sometimes the impression that we face the impossibility to have
a theoretical exchange, since all theoretical positions of the others are second-order
observed. Hence, for instance, when Luhmann claims that “science never asks itself the
question whether there exists a world or (Luhmann 1990: 109), this seems to contradict
common sense perception of what scientists (as personae) do, certainly in mainstream IR.
But Luhmann can always retreat to a n-order observation, saying that this apparently
external reference is internally produced by the scientific system itself, something which
must remain unseen by the scientific personae. By arguing that everything is construction
and that every phenomenon apparently different can, via system-theory, observed to be
constructed, the theory is operationally closed to any criticism: the system-theoretical
observer always observes more (the blind spot) than his/her interlocutor. It is
systematically superior.

The obvious question is why we should not apply this to system theory itself. Luhmann
would applaud it. What is not sure whether he would admit both of the
following implications. One application Luhmann certainly would admit, is to say that
since we now observe system-theory's blind spots, we actually stay within the research programme of system theory itself. We simply move to another reflexive ring. Hence, far from criticising system-theory, it shows its Anschlußfähigkeit. And this attempt would again apparently resolve the paradox that keeps the whole theory going, the paradox of conceiving unity as unity-and-difference, the divine principle. As usual, the solution is in time (observation of observations can be attributed to be timely separated, see Luhmann, 1990 #1628: 79). But this implication is not the only one. One could also argue that an observation of the way system theory observes could “sociologise” it without recourse to system theory itself. Classical candidates are critical theory or all sociologies of knowledge which refer to the notion of interest (however defined) or historicity (Mannheim), typical in German sociology. One could use Bourdieu to show to what extent system theory itself is part of the reproduction of an academic field, using and distributing forms of capital to uphold/change power positions., a study of reproduction, this, which does not need binary codes. His particular vision for instance of the division of systems then becomes something which is not positive, but normative (power should stay out of science, out of economics, and so on). As a result we have a kind of technocratic vision of social systems - why should we accept this implication?

A further sociologising move needs reference to social theories which can handle this reflexivity, like system theory. Yet, why should we feel compelled to use only system theory for doing so, if other ones are available? Why should one accept the superiority (authority!) of a theory which believes that as long as it can redescribe everything in its terms is correct?

Perhaps, system theory does not care, whether it should be followed/accepted. It would simply in turn observe its non-acceptance for the non-sharing of criteria, or whatever other reason, and simply open up another regress. But then, there are many passages in Luhmann, which seem to indicate that system theory tries to show its superior Anschlußfähigkeit, tries to justify itself. What would be the sense of scientific communication, if not?
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References

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i I must admit, however, that, despite all the complexity added by different level (order) observations, Luhmann’s concept of observation often seemed strangely flat to me – as if such first order observations in itself were not problematic, and would only become so by moving up a level.

ii It is not my fault that many scholars never tire to use profound-sounding German concepts whenever they have to refer to this kind of ideas.

iii See Stefan Rossbach (2000). This method of functional equivalence was early used in comparative law. See Karl Loewenstein’s Verfassungslehre, a book first published in the US, and then translated into German in the 1950s. As a student of law, Luhmann was very probably aware of it.

iv The locus classicus is Blau 1964. But see also Baldwin (1978; 1989 [1971]).

v Muddling theories again, Luhmann repeatedly refers to negative sanction as sources of power. See Luhmann (1990 [1981]: 158).

vi This has been an important theme in the move to more structural/impersonal power debates in IR (see Kratochwil 1988: in particular p. 272; Little 1989). For a discussion, see Guzzini (1993).

vii Whether it makes sense to talk about power relations when power is a medium of communication is another point.

viii Since Luhmann criticises the ethics of pluralism (refraining from proposing his own vision), also this conception of translation might make the latter more acceptable.

ix This is, roughly, where some post-structuralists tend to put their own position, since strangers are at the border, the margins, both in and out of a community/society.

x One interesting path which I am not following here is Barnes’, a constructivist thinker usually quoted by Luhmann, who reminded us, that this tautology might be all there is to the concept of power (Barnes 1988).

xi I first wanted to write “sociologise”, but after the “horizontalise”, I was afraid that Chris, in despair, would buy a basic dictionary for me.

xii Not to mention the fact that Luhmann has an incredible capacity to simply absorb (anschließen) any literature which seems somewhat to fit his own approach. There are only internally coupled from within his own system theory. No theoretical translation, no real exchange, in fact. As if he wanted to prove in his own autistic way that his theory was correct.