

BOOK REVIEW

Introduction to Systems Theory

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Introduction to Systems Theory

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This book is a translated transcript of a series of lectures provided by Niklas Luhman in 1991-2. The title of the book refers to a “course” (around twenty lectures), but this is clearly a fairly advanced course. Any reader unfamiliar with the basic ideas of Weber, Durkheim, Kant, Habermas etc. will find this book difficult reading indeed. On the last page of the book we can read, “By ‘Introduction’ I do not mean so much what is easily understood, or has been popularised or is suitable for beginners. At least, that is not what I had in mind when I chose the title for this lecture series.” (p. 253). So what does he have in mind? The tone of the argument is more Germanic than we would find in the Anglo-American tradition, and much importance is attached to argumentation from the school of philosophy which takes a line from Kant via Hegel to Husserl. Therefore this book will mostly interest systems thinkers who are

concerned with the sociological / philosophical aspects of systems theory. To begin with, the work mainly attempts to ground *sociology* in systems thinking—and not the other way around. Systems theory (such as is discussed) is taken as given, in the version broadly familiar from Maturana and Varela (albeit with some subtle differences). The problem is how to properly understand sociology; that is sociology seen as a development both in itself and one arising from the European (continental) philosophical tradition.

The book begins by discussing Talcott Parsons’ work, but, of course, Luhman wants to go beyond this work and develop a more fully systems-oriented approach. The next and by far the largest chapter of the book is entitled ‘General Systems Theory’. This is not an introduction to general systems theory, but it is a perspective on important aspects of its development, i.e. those aspects which might foster a better understanding of society. This chapter is followed by five fairly short chapters on *time*, *meaning*, the difference between psychology and sociology (*psychic and social systems*), communication (*as a self-observing operation*) and finally a chapter on structure and conflict. The fact that the book is a lecture-series transcript comes through clearly, and it is in this sense that the

book may be seen as “introductory” – each of these ideas would require substantial discussion, possibly running to several volumes, to be fully elaborated. However, there is enough in this book to gain a insight into Luhman’s core argument, however references are few and far between. It must be assumed that the students who studied this course had received prior instruction in core systems ideas. At any rate, it is not so much the *inclusion* of some systems theorists’ work (e.g. Ashby, Maturana and Varela) that may be of interest, but the complete *absence* of others (e.g. Beer, Checkland, etc.). The basic approach is that systems are very definitely *in the world*. Indeed, we – as humans – are systems too; systems (what are termed ‘*psychic* systems’) trying to understand social systems. This leads to the rejection of the Parsonian systems-theory-as-explanation approach. According to Luhman, the problem is that Parson’s theory became too embroiled in its own peculiarities to really take advantage of interdisciplinary systems theory. Be that as it may, it is Luhman’s theory we are interested in here, and elaborating this takes up the vast majority of the book.

Luhman does consider the “hard” and “soft” potential of systems theory – at least in what he terms the “analytic” and “concrete” approaches he discerns, “An ‘analytic’ systems theory leaves it to the systems theorist *qua* external observer to decide what he considers to be a system or the environment, which aspect of reality he groups together in a system and which ones he wants to exclude ... In contrast, a systems theory is ‘concrete’ if it starts with the assumption that system formation happens in reality and that the systems theorist must describe exactly the way they are.” (p.39). Luhman is aware that different epistemological assumptions are at work here (but he does not acknowledge that different political motivations may also be at work here too). He concludes that this dispute – between what we might term “hard” and “soft” approaches, “[W]ould seem to be undecidable. The key question is whether there is a mistake that is common to both approaches, which is to say, whether there is something in need of

correction in both cases.” (p. 40). However, little more is said about this issue, and neither is much proffered to replace these paradigms with a new one.

A key idea throughout the remainder of his argument – is the idea of loose (but structural) coupling – indeed loose coupling is seen to be positively beneficial. Following Maturana, there is a broad acceptance of a biological view of man – somehow, however, imbued with consciousness (although no philosophy of mind is attempted to support this conception). As such, consciousness is fairly loosely coupled with its environment. Concerning the human being as a system, he says, “Everything depends on the system not establishing direct contact with the environment and instead being stimulated merely photo-mechanically or acoustically by means of light or sound waves and subsequently producing information from this input by means of the system’s own apparatus. This information does not exist in the environment but has its environmental correlates that, however, only an observer can see.” (p. 86). For Luhman, this sort of loose coupling is central to the survival of the system, “Loosely coupled systems are more stable than tightly coupled ones. ‘Tight coupling’ is a very improbable arrangement. It is not to be found in nature.” (p. 123). This is (typically) an area where this book has definite weaknesses; one being the complete absence of any concrete examples of what is intended throughout the entire book. Luhman’s attempt here to remain in the realm of theory (*a la* e.g. Kant) is deeply problematic. Luhman seems to have been aware of such possible criticisms, “[O]ne always hears the complaint that all of this is terribly abstract”. (p. 139). To move on, for now, we must accept the argument concerning the advantages of loose coupling provisionally.

The two chapters that follow, on time and on meaning, should not be skipped if one wishes to acquire a holistic understanding of Luhman’s thought, however, they will not be considered here. They could be considered as virtually stand-alone treatises on these topics – at least insofar as they are germane to the human sciences. The main arguments however lie in

the final two chapters. The central concern of these latter chapters is with *communication* and *conflict* respectively. Like Habermas, Luhman considers that communication is the defining feature of “the social”. But unlike Habermas, Luhman does not consider that communication is necessarily aimed at achieving consensus; communication gives rise to understanding, and as such *is* the central feature of *all* social systems. However, and especially if one considers cross—cultural matters, Luhman does not put *consensus* centre stage, “In my theory, the act of communication ... ends in understanding. Such a theory leaves entirely open what is going to happen next, and, in particular, it leaves open whether one says ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to what has been understood.” (p. 223). Luhman does not seek to deny the reality of conflict within and amongst social systems. Indeed he states, “It is absurd to claim that conflicts are neglected in systems theory. In fact, conflicts are highly integrated systems.” (p. 250). However, the solution to problems of conflict is, again one of *loose* (as opposed to *tight*) coupling, “This problem of conflicts is closely connected to

... the distinction between *tight coupling* and *loose coupling*. If social processes are tightly coupled, conflicts spread. If they are loosely coupled, it is easier to isolate conflicts.” (p. 252). Again, some examples would help here; without them any real assessment, as to whether or not Luhman’s *systems theory* can be classified as (broadly) *conservative* or *critical*, is problematic. However, it does not appear that conflict plays the central role in Luhman’s analysis of society.

Insofar as Luhman’s theory is a *systems theory* one can be of little doubt. But what kind of systems theory is it? Frustratingly, it will have to be for you to decide. The value of this book lies in awakening and reawakening thoughts about the basic purposes and premises of systems theory insofar as they are applicable to the social realm. Finally, by all means obtain a some copies of this book for the systems section of the library – it deserves its place there. However, owing to the absence of concrete examples, I would definitely not recommend that this book is utilised as an introductory text on (e.g.) an undergraduate systems programme.