Niklas Luhmann

TRUST AND POWER

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Niklas Luhmann's Sociological Enlightenment and its Realization in *Trust* and *Power*

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Sociological Enlightenment

Those engaged in the discipline of sociology, as it has evolved in English-speaking countries, may be forgiven if they have had some difficulty in recognizing these two books as bearing any close resemblance to what they have come to know as sociological research. After all, they make no attempt to apply established and respected empirical research methods to uncover facts about the ways in which people trust or exercise power, and to provide causal explanations for such facts. On the theoretical level, Luhmann's account may also appear strangely lacking in explanations of human social behaviour that would be amenable to testing through research in the way that Karl Popper recommended as marking the difference between science and non-science. Luhmann offers no explanations as such, but presents descriptive accounts of processes, using a conceptual framework that he himself has created. Yet, despite all this, Luhmann insists that the task he has undertaken is well and truly sociological, and rightly so, as this introduction will explain.

For Luhmann, the serious problems of fragmentation and credibility faced by the social sciences today can be traced back to the European Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The old certainties – the belief in the capacity of human intelligence to develop a transcendental rationality, and the idea of infinite progress through this increased knowledge – seemed to work well for a time as a self-description of intellectual human endeavour. Where sociology was concerned, however, Luhmann saw this quest for truth and progress as an unfortunate starting point. It did not lead, as it was expected to do, to increased knowledge opening the way to a better world. Instead what has emerged is a multitude of coexisting theories and hypotheses which give the impression of employing reliable scientific methods, but which depend ultimately for their validity on the particular belief

about human nature that the particular sociological observer subscribes to.

If sociology is to achieve its potential as a science, what is needed, according to Luhmann, is a new kind of enlightenment – a sociological enlightenment – one that rejects the unsustainable beliefs of 'old Europe' by devising a totally new way of understanding what society consists of and how it could be studied. This is the *Soziologische Aufklärung* (sociological enlightenment). Moreover, for Luhmann, sociology is uniquely placed to enlighten society about itself. 'Sociology is enlightenment', he explained, 'when it observes society in a manner different from the way society in its different milieux observes itself.'[1] This is also meant to enlighten sociology itself by establishing a theoretical vocabulary that is on the one hand much more capable of grasping the complexity, eventfulness and ambiguities of social life, but on the other hand much more rigorous and encompassing in its approach. This puts emphasis on probing and challenging established patterns of thinking by comparing and relating them to, and contrasting them with, one another. Society is not seen as a natural outcome of human action, but as an improbable result of contingent events. Luhmann is here particularly interested in how these improbabilities are transformed into systems of meaning-generating communications. These are the generalized media of communication, of which trust and power are but two examples. The next stage, the embryos of which are visible in *Trust* and *Power*, but which is not fully developed until his later works on different social systems, is to observe how, within each system itself, the capacity evolves for constructing its own unique version of its environment, so that one is left with not just one overriding version of what society accepts as truth and reality, but with several versions, which coexist uneasily and which continually re-establish their own identity through developing new ways of accommodating the versions of reality produced by other systems. This, for Luhmann, is what both typifies modern society and makes classical, Enlightenment-based sociology so ill-equipped to capture the complexity of that society.

However, Luhmann would not have been Luhmann had he not added an ironic twist to the notion of circularity or self-reference, whereby within each system events are explained in terms of pre-existing assumptions of what constitutes truth and reality. 'Of course, sociology', he writes, 'is nothing but a milieu of its own.'[2] So, as a result of this new sociological enlightenment, the uniquely sociological way of observing society necessarily and inevitably becomes yet another 'milieu', another system which observes society observing society itself. But at least this time the starting point is exclusively sociological, rather than based on moral beliefs or, as Luhmann puts it, ethical concerns, and at least this time the language, concepts and methods that it deploys are rigorous and sociological. Luhmann further explains that if sociology wants to see itself as a 'critical' science it cannot simply interpret itself as an opposition science that takes

sides in the dispute between progressive and conservative ideologies.[3] This can only lead to a failure to reflect upon the unity of the difference. A 'critical' project would mean that sociology is in a position to distinguish and is able to reflect upon the use of its distinctions. In his short, enigmatic Preface to *Trust*, Luhmann takes a little further his explanation of the nature of this project. He provides an account of how one should distinguish his new approach to societal analysis from what he sees as the ideologically committed sociological thinkers whose work was influential in Germany at the time he was writing his book.[4] He identifies what he sees as 'the disadvantages' that can arise from importing into sociology 'terms and concepts from daily usage concerning the traditional world of ethical ideas'. These disadvantages predominate where this 'introduction of the moral into sociological concepts' takes the form of a 'critical demolition and surprising presentation of the familiar in unfamiliar ways or of unmasking ideological beliefs'. Clearly this is a mild but direct attack on members of the Frankfurt School who were indeed engaged in producing a version of sociology which involved investigations of what Luhmann regarded as moral issues and, in many instances, a commitment to one particular side in the moral debate. In the aftermath of the overthrow of National Socialism in the Second World War, this, for Luhmann, was indeed 'an easy trick to perform'. Luhmann ends his Preface by telling his readers of a new kind of sociology, one that does not rely on moral implants but instead seeks 'to establish its intellectual position in positive terms by *formulating a theory of its own*'.[5] Only once this has been established, he remarks, might it be advantageous to enter into a dialogue with those morality-based understandings of the world.

As we have already noted, Luhmann made it clear in the *Soziologische Aufklärung* essays that he wrote at around this time that the task of his systems approach to functional analysis would be to offer a theory which would allow sociology to identify the concepts and processes that increase the likelihood of people acting together in communal ways and of these interactions repeating themselves in a way that provides stability for the participants. As Luhmann explains, 'Functional analysis is not a matter of establishing connections between established reasons or reliable knowledge in order to generate secondary knowledge.' Rather, 'Problems are posed in terms of the maintenance of stability of action systems.'[6] What then are these 'systems' and what is their role in Luhmann's theory?

The Meaning of Systems

Luhmann uses the term 'systems' in a very specific way – a fact that is very often missed by those who wish to classify him as a systems theorist in the traditional sense.[7] Early anthropological and previous functionalist theories understood systems through the existence of networks of people and

describe the ways that individuals or groups of individuals, who are seen as belonging to the same organization or institution, relate to one another. The identification of a system and its description rely for their validity on the assumption of naturalism in the social world. Social systems exist naturally in society just as physical systems exist in the natural world. This makes it possible for observers of social systems to capture reality through unproblematic descriptions of what they are and what they do. In a similar way, people can be seen as belonging to a system. Judges, therefore, are part of the legal system, for example, and psychiatrists part of the medical system. Yet these predominantly naturalistic principles fail to capture the idea of the system as developed by Luhmann. Within his theory, systems are not simply parts of the natural world or extensions of physical entities. They are not subject to laws and logic governing their operations, the discovery of which increases the possibilities for control and improvement.

In contrast to these naturalistic accounts of systems, modern systems theory, as represented by, for example, Ludwig von Bertalanffy, Ralph Gerard, Kenneth Boulding and Anatol Rapoport, advances the idea that systems are open because they have external interactions.[8] In sociology, the most prominent author associated with this systems theory thinking is Talcott Parsons. Parsons presents a theory that attempts to understand system structures in terms of the functions they serve in the maintenance of structural patterns and how this persistence of the system could be explained through different variables. This systems theory received considerable criticism. According to the critics, human beings are seen as being reduced to mere tokens within a structure over which they have no control. Impersonal systems appear to be more powerful than individuals. Moreover, systems are not open to change, because their maintenance is necessary for the maintenance of society and social institutions and they are not open to deviant behaviour or fringe groups. It is clear that these criticisms were based not purely on scientific principles, but to a substantial degree on ideological grounds. This is something that we shall take up later in our introduction.

Although Luhmann calls his theory a systems theory, it is conceptually far removed from the sociological Anglo-American tradition of systems theories. His notion of systems, one cannot over-emphasize, is 1) anything but metaphysical or analytical, and 2) not concerned with structural maintenance, but with highly dynamic meaning-making. Firstly, Luhmann's conception of the system is not an analytical construct; systems are real-world empirical phenomena. His often quoted statement from the first chapter of his book *Social Systems*, 'The following considerations assume that there are systems',[9] does not mean that systems have an essence-like existence making them readily amenable to identification, description and research. Rather, as he states, '*the concept of systems refers to something that is in reality a system* and thereby incurs the responsibility of testing its statement against reality'.[10] In other words, Luhmann assumes that the

reproduction and redundant formation of systems is an empirical reality. He therefore wants to devise sociological concepts whose validity ultimately depends on there being a reality against which they can be tested. He is seeking a close connection with empirical research that can be directed by those concepts. For instance, it is well known that Luhmann refers in his systems theory not to people, but to networks of communications. This does not mean that social systems could exist without people (or psychic systems), but that the meaningful reproduction and determination of meaning is a self-referential process determined by subsequent sequences of communication rather than by the will of individual human beings, the concerted efforts of groups of human beings, or some external force. Luhmann's notion of meaning has often been overlooked or misinterpreted, with the result that his insistence on systems of communication rather than people has been seen as anti-humanist or as evidence that he simply and wilfully ignored the importance of people. This is a fundamental misreading of Luhmann's intentions.

Secondly, Luhmann's systems theory is concerned with highly dynamic meaning-making in a complex world. Meaning-making cannot be grasped through the older models of systems theory that relied on presuppositions that defined in advance what the world is, as, for instance, in Parsons' assumption of an a priori integration through values and norms. Luhmann suggests that such an external position of an observer is not possible, because every observer is already part of this process of meaning-making. Luhmann's opening statement, citing Spinoza, to his *Theory of Society* acknowledges this direction: 'That which cannot be conceived through anything else must be conceived through itself.'[11] Meaning is not determined through an external structure (values or people), but meaning determines meaning. It is this self-referential dynamic of the term 'system' that Luhmann is interested in, or what he called 'a system that unfolded an intellectual dynamic all of its own, which is among the most fascinating phenomena that we are able to witness today'.[12] It is this new paradigm of the system that has led to a '"meaningful" revolutionization of the theory of society'.[13] This means that systems and communications relate to, and only to, the organization of meaning. They should not be understood as objects but *as observations and only as observations*. These observations in turn should not be understood as facts or objects 'but as boundaries, as markings of differences'.[14] An observation can be defined as both a distinction and an indication: something is distinguished, as an object or a subject, from something else and, through this distinction, it is indicated. For instance, the government can be distinguished *through observation* from its opposition, what is lawful can be distinguished from what is unlawful *only through observations*, and these observations, once made, allow for subsequent operations to make distinctions based on the distinctions government/opposition and lawful/unlawful. Observations, then, are not vehicles but

the very operations that constitute a system. 'The system can constitute operations of its own only further to operations of its own and in anticipation of further operations of the same system.'[15]

At the level of society, these then are Luhmann's function systems. They are functional systems because they cope with the generation of specific meanings over time. These concepts of systems and function are quite unlike the notions inherent in traditional systems theory, including that of Talcott Parsons. The 'functional analysis' Luhmann undertakes in *Trust* and *Power* is not a matter of making connections either between systems of people or between bodies of existing knowledge, but of examining how precarious meaning-making and its identity, which allows the formation of society, emerges from the relation between system and environment in a complex world.

In *Trust*, and to a lesser extent in *Power*, Luhmann describes the way that social systems are able to solve a very specific problem for society – that of stabilizing communications over time. As he writes in Chapter 2 of *Trust*, '[a] theory of trust presupposes a theory of time'. There follows a fascinating discussion concerning the two ways of identifying time – either as a series of events or as a constancy, 'a continuously actual present, with the future always in prospect and the past flowing away'. Since trust can only be secured and maintained in the present, 'the basis of all trust is an enduring continuum of changing events, as the totality of constancies where events can occur'. For Luhmann, the problem of trust (as for all social systems) lies in the fact that 'the future contains far more possibilities than could ever be realized in the present and transferred to the past'.[16] This places an excessive burden on people, who risk being frozen into immobility or indecisiveness by the prospect of a wholly uncertain future or, as Luhmann puts it, 'this everlastingly over-complex future'. Nothing could be planned or calculated in advance. If one distinguishes *future present* (the future that will become the present) from *present future* (the future as seen in the present), one can understand how the discrepancy between them – a discrepancy brought about by unanticipated future events which change the *present future* – needs to be resolved for decisions to be made and projects put in motion. Trust, therefore, 'is one of the ways of bringing this about'. It does so by reducing complexity in a way that allows people to 'prune the future so as to measure up to the present … [i]t is an attempt to envisage the future but not to bring about future presents'.[17]

Where power is concerned, the problem of time takes on a somewhat different form. If it were not for the communicative system of power, it would be necessary for the threat of immediate violence to be continually present in order to bring about the 'avoidance alternative' that would keep the violence at bay and so achieve the desired result. The way that power is organized within the political system replaces and makes unnecessary the 'omnipresence of physical force'. This Luhmann refers to as 'temporalizing violence'. As he explains, '[p]hysical force is put in

place as the *beginning* of the system, which leads to the selection of rules, whose function, rationality and legitimacy render them independent of past, initial conditions'.[18] Simultaneously it is portrayed as a '*future* event' which can be avoided, if one stays on the right side of those rules. Both time horizons – the initial threat of physical force and the future event that will trigger that force – are transformed into effective regulation through secondary coding by means of law. The system of power allows for a regulated present which is no longer dependent upon the immediate threat of violence and, perhaps even more importantly, cannot be controlled through violence.

The Historical and Sociological Context of *Trust* and *Power*

Trust and *Power* were originally published separately. The first edition of *Vertrauen* (*Trust*) appeared in 1968, followed by an extended edition in 1973. The book on *Macht* (*Power*) was published in 1975. Professor Tom Burns (d. 2001), at the University of Edinburgh, organized and arranged for the first translation of both books combined into one volume. The translation was undertaken by three Edinburgh postgraduate students with some knowledge of German. Both *Trust* and *Power* come from the pre-autopoietic period in Luhmann's work. Although Luhmann had already begun to elaborate his vision for a theory of society, his main theoretical terms gravitated around concepts like system, meaning (in the phenomenological sense), action, generalized symbolic media, and functionalism.

When Luhmann published the book on *Vertrauen*, the topic of trust was not much discussed within the wider social sciences.[19] The first edition of the book was written while Luhmann was working at the University of Münster Institute for Social Research, based in Dortmund. Founded in 1946 and focused on the economic restructuring of the Ruhr valley, it was seen as one of the key empirical and sociological institutes at that time in Germany. In the context of an empirical research environment and his growing theoretical ambition, Luhmann was struck by the 'statements about trust [that] are today still very far removed from being substantiated by methodologically valid means.'[20] The intention of the *Trust* book was therefore to progress with his theoretical project, but with an applied and empirical direction in mind.[21] The reader will notice that the book contains frequent references that point to further empirical research. Luhmann extended the book for the 1973 edition, which was the basis for the English translation in 1979. Luhmann's identification of trust in relation to complexity as being a social not just a psychological coping mechanism had an impact on several other influential sociologists in the Anglophone world.[22] As a sociological topic, trust has attracted increasing interest since the 1980s, but in that decade there were already signs

of Luhmann's declining interest in the subject, despite a minor essay,[23] as well as a chapter in the book *Social Systems*.[24] In Luhmann's late work of the 1990s the issue has almost completely vanished, beyond sporadic remarks and footnotes. However, despite this visible attenuation, it seems that Luhmann did not regard the topic as irrelevant; rather, the shift can be attributed to more general changes in his theory. In the early writings, trust was strongly bound to the problem of reduction of complexity within an action-theoretical framework. These two elements (action and reduction of complexity) subsequently faded into the background or were displaced by later theoretical developments – as, for instance, in the transition to an emphasis on communication and observation – and the term *trust* was never fully reworked to reflect these later developments. Luhmann's *Social Systems* (1984/1995), which set the benchmark for terms like communication and autopoiesis, sought to combine trust with the problem of double contingency, but no integration of the concept of trust can be found in his subsequent works.

The book on power had a different origin. At the time it was published, Luhmann was already being appointed professor at the University of Bielefeld. Since the early 1960s, a number of studies in the wider field of systems theory that analysed the political system and related phenomena had been published.[25] These publications had received considerable criticism, however, for their neglect of the role of power. It seemed that the control abilities associated with the term system would define power out of existence. Luhmann was well aware of this debate and referred to it in the posthumously published *Macht im System* (Power in the System).[26] It seemed quite clear to him that this direction of systems theory would ignore empirical research and would not fit with his knowledge of the political milieu. He was therefore actively looking for a way to remedy this deficit of systems theory, and attempted to address the problem in a second book published posthumously, called *Politische Soziologie* (*Political Sociology*).[27] The original outline for this account of the political system included a planned chapter on power, but it was never written, nor did Luhmann attempt to integrate the smaller book on the subject into the final manuscript of nearly 500 pages. It seems that both posthumous publications, while written during Luhmann's pre-autopoietic period, remained unpublished during his lifetime because he was unhappy with their theoretical conclusions and their inability to account adequately for this aspect of social reality.

Published in 1975, the German text on *Macht* represents a first culmination of these enormous efforts. The book can be seen as the first application of the newly developed or developing theory of symbolic generalized communication media; in particular, it reflects Luhmann's growing interest in social communication as the unit of social systems. He notes that this theoretical change represents the most severe break with older theories of power. Power should simply be seen as a personal property or

ability, but needs to be integrated into a theory that can account for a specific and meaningful steering of communication. The wealth of empirical research that informs this small publication is quite outstanding, covering topics including violence, conflict, the state, political parties, democracy, leadership, authority, terrorism and much more. In Luhmann's later writings communication became the defining paradigm of social systems, with power being one of the central topics that informed a range of later publications and culminating in the posthumous publication of *Politik der Gesellschaft* (*Politics as a Social System*),[28] in which power, communication, medium and social system are the central theoretical terms.

Functional Analysis and its Semantics

Luhmann's approach to empirical research bears little relation to the ethnographic studies, social surveys or observational reports that fill the pages of today's sociology journals. Both Luhmann's methods and the technical vocabulary he employs all flowed from the theoretical problems he set himself. While his eclectic research methods may not comply with the conventional, contemporary requirements for social science research, with its insistence on replication, testability and compliance with a recognized methodology, they are nevertheless empirical in that they rely on observations in the broadest sense of the term – both his observations and those derived from secondary sources. As we have mentioned, Luhmann does not subscribe to the view that sociological observers are in the business of capturing truth or reality. They rely, like all other observers of their environment, on a version of external reality that has been made possible through reduced complexity. Their observations will inevitably depend upon the presuppositions they bring with them about the nature of the phenomenon being observed. This will influence what they select to research and how they interpret their findings. The fact that other empirical sociologists accept these findings as valid does not mean that they correspond to some universal truth, just that they are true for those empirical sociologists. As Luhmann writes in *Power*, 'there are no independent foundations for empirical certainty'.[29] Reality is accessible only in a partial form through the selections of each observer, be they individuals or social systems. Scientifically validated research methods operate, like all prescriptive modes of observation, as filters which make selective aspects of reality accessible. As a general rule, the more rigorous the methods the narrower the aspect of reality that becomes accessible to the observer.

It is for this reason that Luhmann himself employs research methods that, as we have noted, are eclectic and multi-faceted, to say the very least. In these two books, he draws upon his own empirical research (with Renate Mayntz), his informal ethnographic observations obtained through his travels throughout the world, and his extensive knowledge of

both classical Greek and Roman works as well as European and American literature across a wide range of disciplines, both historical and contemporary. As regards empirical scientific work, he refers throughout the two books to studies by sociologists, political scientists, criminologists, anthropologists and social and developmental psychologists. When he is not engaging with the ideas of other theorists and contrasting them with his own theses, he is constantly using the evidence provided by other people's work as an assurance that what he is describing is not just a figment of his own speculations.

Turning to Luhmann's semantics, we have already noted how important it was in his eyes to generate terms and concepts relating to society that were essentially sociological, rather than using those already in existence in daily usage with their moral overtones. His objective was not to produce an esoteric language shared only by social theorists, but to develop a language which was able to manage the new ideas created by the dynamism of his new enlightenment and its unique way of observing the world. The hope was that these terms, once created, would eventually provide a common vocabulary to enable communication to take place between different understandings of the social world. If one takes the physical sciences as a model, this is not too outrageous an ambition. For example, genetics has successfully created around the concept of 'the gene' a whole new theoretical language to describe the process of evolution, a language that has found its way into the legal and political spheres, allowing laws to be drawn up and policies to be formulated. The same is true of the concepts generated by quantum physics. New scientific discoveries have brought about the need to generate new terms, to find a new theoretical language in order that these new ideas can be communicated and discussed. Many of them have subsequently found their way into common parlance to the extent that the new reality that they create is treated by the communications media as factual knowledge. In seeking to develop a new conceptual language fit for the purpose of describing how society operates, Luhmann was not, in scientific terms at least, preaching revolution. Yet in relation to mainstream sociology, this was combined with his rejection of the prevailing narrative tradition, derived for the most part from anthropology – the 'telling of stories' to account for the way that people think about and act towards one another in social situations. This narrative technique, of course, had the added advantage of creating the expectation that anyone who had acquired a high level of literacy should be able to understand sociological texts. Luhmann's writings tended to confound this expectation.

Luhmann turns his back on the narrative form conceived as a way of making life easy for the reader. In *Trust* and *Power*, as in his many other books and essays, the way he develops his solutions to the problems he himself poses, and defends those solutions against criticisms that he himself deploys, is much more in keeping with the philosophical tradi-

tion, and in particular the Greek rhetorical tradition of argument and persuasion. He devotes each chapter of these books to his ideas around a particular topic. The chapters thus take the form of a series of linked essays. The books themselves are structured as a progression culminating in a final analysis which could not have been achieved if the arguments set out in the earlier chapters had not been fully discussed. Although each chapter may appear to the reader to be self-contained, only by reading the chapters in sequence is one able to grasp the full impact of Luhmann's theoretical position.

The Reception of Luhmann's Sociology in English-speaking Countries

The publication of the English versions of *Trust* and *Power* in 1979 was the very first time that any of Luhmann's books had appeared in English. *A Sociological Theory of Law* was to follow five years later, and *Love as Passion* in 1986. His major theoretical work *Social Systems* was published in the 1990s, as well as several other of his many books and articles. These publications reflect an initial burst of interest among English-speaking sociologists in Luhmann's new scientific, ideology-free sociology. This may even have given him some hope that the day of his sociological enlightenment was about to dawn. It is difficult to know in retrospect whether this early interest was driven by the novelty of Luhmann's ideas, contrasting sharply as they did with the critical stance taken by the Frankfurt School and the more naturalistic approach to social inquiry adopted by many American sociologists, or whether it was inspired by an admiration for Luhmann's apparent attempt to revive the nineteenth-century vision of a 'grand theory' of society. In any event, the years that followed saw a decline of interest in Anglo-Saxon countries, at least among sociologists. The result was that, in sharp contrast to, say, Habermas, Foucault or Bourdieu, only a fraction of his vast output was translated into English. Today, sociology, as it is taught and studied in English-speaking countries, appears either to ignore Luhmann entirely or is actively hostile to his theory. In both the UK and the US any reference to his works in the sociological literature is a rarity, and accounts of his theory are almost totally absent from the syllabuses and textbooks of academic undergraduate and postgraduate sociology courses.

   Within these countries and Anglophone academia generally, Luhmann is much more likely to be included in law, political science, German literature, art, media and cultural studies or business management programmes than studied as a social theorist in sociology departments. Not surprisingly, there is a tendency among these non-sociological disciplines to treat Luhmann's writings selectively, in ways that throw light on their specific intellectual concerns, paying little or no attention to his vision of

a sociological enlightenment or even to the general theory of communicative function systems that underpins all his accounts of the operations of different communications media and different social systems. There is little doubt that Luhmann was pleased to see his ideas influencing so many different academic fields. Yet the pay-off for such success has undoubtedly been a substantial decline of interest in his work within sociology, and in Anglophone countries an almost complete neglect of – and in some instances marked hostility towards – his general social theory. Significantly, in the five years before his death in 1998 he was much more likely to be invited overseas to speak at law conferences and seminars than at sociological or social theory events.

Various reasons have been put forward for the apparent failure of Luhmann's original and creative approach to the study of society to make any headway within Anglophone sociology. These include:

- The sheer abstractness and complex nature of the theory, which requires a considerable devotion of time and effort before it can be properly understood and applied. This makes it difficult both to study and to teach.
- The way that the theory describes how society exists and operates is entirely counter-intuitive. It runs contrary not only to all the self-descriptions of the roles played in social events and social evolution by all the main social systems, including politics, law, the mass media and science, but also to the accounts of reality that human beings have acquired through socialization concerning the world around them, their place in that world and their ability to change their environment and their own destiny. This applies to versions of society and social change offered by religions as well those inherent in secular beliefs about humanity and human destiny.
- The perception that, underlying Luhmann's theoretical notion of closed systems, there is a normative agenda for promoting the ideal of minimal state intervention. This plays into the hands of liberal conservative factions and antagonizes those academic thinkers who advocate the expansion of the welfare state as a means of promoting social justice and equality.[30]
- The portrayal of Luhmann among American theorists as 'a fully committed systems theorist', with all the naturalistic tendencies associated with that label. This leads to the view that Luhmann supports the view that systems are more important than the individual, with the reduction of complexity that systems achieve being seen as a restriction of the horizon of human possibilities.[31]
- The view that Luhmann's theory is anti-humanist in that it reduces human beings to mere objects within or semantic artefacts of social systems. We have already discussed how this misrepresents Luhmann's ideas, but the misinterpretation has not prevented some extreme ver-

sions of this criticism emerging and gaining credence among social theorists.[32]

- The difficulties in reconciling Luhmann's theory with the growing demand within sociology for empirical testing using accepted and accredited research methods.[33] We have already discussed this issue at some length in our section on 'Functional Analysis and its Semantics'.

- Luhmann's detachment throughout his academic career from any direct involvement in ongoing political or moral debates. No doubt he saw this lack of commitment to any policy agenda and unwillingness to make pronouncements on matters of public interest as necessary to protect his position as a social scientist. His trenchant warnings against ideologically motivated sociology were, after all, sustainable only to the extent that he himself remained aloof from all ideological concerns. Nevertheless, this aloofness appeared to have prevented him from gaining the popularity that was accorded to some other philosophers and social theorists, both European and Anglo-American, during the turbulent period immediately before and after the social upheavals of 1968. Choosing not to come out in support of radical social change was to risk being seen as someone who defended the existing social order. For example, Luhmann's theoretical observations on the relative impotence of 'New Social Movements' (*Ecological Communication* (1989)) and 'Protest Movements' (*Risk* (1993)) in changing the world tended to be interpreted as direct criticisms of these movements.

As one would expect, the factors that have been identified as accounting for the indifference of Anglophone sociology towards Luhmann's general theory of society are varied and complex. Those that can be attributed to his intricate style of writing or the form or nature of the theory itself do not on their own provide a sufficient explanation for the neglect or hostility that has led to its absence from sociology syllabuses in English-speaking countries. Many social theories are abstract and difficult to understand, but if they had been rejected on this basis, only the simplest, easiest to grasp, ideas about the social world would have gained any credence among sociologists. This is clearly not the case. Similarly, philosophers from Plato onwards have produced counter-intuitive ideas about society, the nature of reality, and the capacity of human beings to change the world around them, but this has not resulted in their rejection or prevented them from being studied and assessed on the basis of their contribution to understanding. To explain why Luhmann's ideas have had such little influence within Anglophone sociology, therefore, one needs to go beyond the features inherent in the theory or its elucidation and examine the interaction between those features, the perception of the theory among sociological scholars, the self-description of society, and the trajectory that sociology as an academic discipline has taken since the 1970s in English-speaking countries.

Much of that sociology is split along ideological lines. Peter Berger, the eminent American sociologist and author of *Invitation to Sociology*, calls this 'the ideologization of sociology'. 'The ideologues', who have been in the ascendancy for the last thirty years, he wrote in 2002:

> have deformed science into an instrument of agitation and propaganda, … invariably for causes on the left of the ideological spectrum. The core scientific principle of objectivity has been ignored in practice and denied validity in theory. Thus a large number of sociologists have become active combatants in the 'culture wars,' almost always on one side of the battle lines.[34]

Berger sees this 'marxisant' antagonism to capitalism and bourgeois culture, and its combatant role for intellectuals, as evolving into a version of sociology that paved the way for divisions within the discipline which reflected the different identities of oppressed groups – feminist, ethnic, racial and gay – each with their own theories and research agendas and, eventually, their own sub-discipline within sociology.[35]

This combination of identity- and issue-driven sociology with a trend towards specialization within all academic disciplines has contributed in the present century to the fragmentation of sociology into many different 'sociologies'. Because of sociology's uncertain theoretical foundations – built on often conflicting ideological beliefs about the nature of society and the causes of social change – this trend towards fragmentation has been far more marked than in other scientific disciplines. The lack within the discipline of a common theoretical paradigm with a shared theoretical language – which, of course, Luhmann sought to promote – has made it impossible to prevent sociology's fragmentation.

Within the US and the UK the one unifying factor which allows those working from different presuppositions and within different fields of interest all to claim that what they are doing is 'sociological' has been that of empirical research methods. In addition to providing a common body of knowledge which unites all or almost all social scientists, sound methodology has been elevated to the status of a gold standard by which the validity of any piece of research should be measured. While the intention is clearly to align the social sciences with the natural sciences and avoid the kind of subjective, value-laden studies that have dogged sociology's reputation in the past, some would argue that this preoccupation with methods has gone too far. Peter Berger, for example, labels it 'methodological fetishism – the dominance of method over content'.[36] We would argue that it has also led to the dominance of method over theory and to unsustainable beliefs concerning the ability of methodologically sound research to capture reliable facts. Once again, Luhmann's theory, with its assertion that truth or reality are accessible only through the medium of social communication systems and its emphasis on the relative and limited nature of any one system's ability (even that of science) to provide

incontrovertible knowledge, simply does not fit with the assumptions that lie behind this over-concern with methodology. By the same token, Luhmann's own eclectic approach fails to meet the standards required today by the guardians of social science research orthodoxy, making his own research at worst poor scholarship and at best an irrelevance for academic sociology as it is currently practised.

Today, the most complex modules in sociology courses tend to be those on research methods, with their emphasis on statistical testing and validation. After all, it is on the soundness of methodology and not on the grasp of theory that research grant applications are assessed and funds awarded. Social theory, by contrast, has been downgraded, because of the need to make it accessible to students as well as to grant-givers and policy-makers and relate it directly to current social issues. For this reason many social theories in recent years have tended to take on a narrative form, embracing ideas about social events and the nature of society that are prevalent within the mass media and popular culture. This notion of theory enhances a view of sociology as a body of knowledge that any reasonably intelligent and socially aware person can readily understand.

In short, for many different reasons, the sociological enlightenment that Luhmann offers simply does not fit the version of sociology that has evolved in the English-speaking world. Those, like us, who admire his work might argue that the decline in sociology from its heyday in the 1970s is due, at least in part, to its failure to pay sufficient attention to Luhmann's ideas for a general social theory. If sociologists had heeded the warnings set out in his Preface to *Trust*, to which we drew the reader's attention earlier in this introduction, perhaps things could have been different. Although we would not claim that Luhmann was prescient in identifying the intrusion of morality into sociological endeavours and the continued reliance by mainstream sociology on 'concepts taken from daily usage', or 'the everyday understandings of the world', the extension and acceleration of these trends, already apparent in the 1970s, have undoubtedly contributed to the decline of sociology.

Luhmann's general theory of society represents the road that sociology did not take back in the twentieth century. We would suggest that the road it did in fact take has not led to any fulfilment of its Enlightenment-inspired claims to 'understand society' and, through the generation of scientific knowledge, to make the world a better place. The vast majority of the predictions made through the acquisition of sociological knowledge have failed to materialize, and the social world in the year 2017 appears more unruly, out-of-control and precarious than has been the case for many generations. Perhaps the time has come for sociologists to abandon their misguided ideologization and their trust in methodology and to spend the time and effort required in studying Luhmann's complex ideas about the nature of society. If they do so there may be some hope that sociology can recover from its long decline and become

once again a discipline that offers perspectives leading to understandings of the world that are not available elsewhere. It is just possible that by providing what we believe to be an accessible translation of Luhmann's books on *Trust* and *Power* we will have helped to begin this new search for enlightenment.

Notes

1 Cited in Baecker (1999), p. 9.
2 Cited in Baecker (1999), p. 9.
3 Luhmann (2013), p. 322. See also *Power*, chapter 3, section 11.
4 Particularly Husserl's with its 'worship of reason … and a socially responsive human being'. Baecker (1999), p. 5.
5 *Trust*, p. 3, emphasis added.
6 *Trust*, p. 6.
7 See Murphy (1982).
8 See Weinberg (1975).
9 Luhmann (1995), p. 12.
10 Luhmann (1995), p. 12, emphasis added.
11 Luhmann (2012b), n.p.
12 Luhmann (2013), p. 43.
13 Luhmann (2012b), p. 28.
14 Luhmann (2012b), p. 29.
15 Luhmann (2012b), p. 33.
16 *Trust*, p. 15.
17 *Trust*, p. 15.
18 *Power*, p. 173.
19 See Arnott (2007); Ebert (2007); Bachmann and Zaheer (2006, 2008).
20 *Trust*, p. 3.
21 Franz-Xaver Kaufmann, one of Luhmann's colleagues at that time, mentioned to us that he had inherited a research project that dealt with the motivations and reactions of the German public towards newly introduced social welfare policies. The study included a newly developed trust and distrust measurement scale. Luhmann had shown an early draft of *Trust* to Kaufmann.
22 Barber (1983); Gambetta (1988); Giddens (1990).
23 Luhmann (1988).
24 Luhmann (1995).
25 Deutsch (1963); Easton (1965); Wiseman (1966); Young (1964).
26 Luhmann (2012a).
27 Luhmann (2010).
28 Luhmann (2002).
29 *Power*, p. 215.
30 Borch (2011), pp. 17–18; Thornhill (2006).
31 Murphy (1982).
32 Bankowski (1994).

33 Besio and Pronzi (2010).
34 Berger (2002), n.p.
35 Summers (2003).
36 Berger (2002): 'Methodological fetishism has resulted in many sociologists using increasingly sophisticated methods to study increasingly trivial topics. It has also meant that sociological studies have become increasingly expensive.'

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Editors' Note on the Revised Translation

We cannot overstate the enormous difficulties in translating Luhmann's works into English. Anyone who has read them in the original German will know about his idiosyncratic style with its long, complex sentences and eccentric punctuation. Communicating complex, abstract ideas is always a difficult task in any language, but the well-established German tradition of philosophical writing allowed Luhmann to assume that his readers would be sufficiently well-read and intellectually trained to follow his detailed, intricate arguments. If one adds to this Luhmann's propensity for inventing new words or combinations of words and giving familiar words new meanings, together with his propensity for irony, one can begin to see just how enormous are the problems in rendering an English version which captures not only the meaning of the German text, but also something of the richness and originality of Luhmann's style.

Given that these two works were the first of Luhmann's books to be translated into English, the three translators of the first edition did a remarkable job. However, as we compared the English and German texts, it became increasingly clear that there were some significant deficiencies in the translation and that to leave them uncorrected would have been irresponsible on our part. Apart from obvious mistranslations, there were also passages which either did not make good sense in English or were based on a misunderstanding of the theoretical concepts.

Any translation always involves a balance between a literal rendition of the original and producing something which both reads well in the target language and at the same time conveys the ideas and intentions of the author. We took the early decision that our prime task was to publish a text that was readily understandable by English-speaking readers, even if that meant failing to give every German word its literal translation. Even so, these two books present as formidable a challenge to readers in English as they do in German, and there is nothing that translators can or should do to reduce that challenge by trying to simplify the text. The only major concession we have made in this direction has been to modify

Luhmann's original punctuation by making the translation comply with English rules and conventions. We find it strange that so many translations of Luhmann do not make these changes, but insist rather on sticking rigidly to the original German punctuation, which, we believe, unnecessarily increases the difficulties of comprehension for English readers.

Fortunately, we have enjoyed some considerable advantages over the original translators. Firstly, we have both been students of Luhmann's social theory for many years and have followed it through its various stages of development. Unlike the original translators, we have been able to benefit from reading Luhmann's expressly theoretical works, notably *Social Systems* (*Soziale Systeme*) and *Introduction to Systems Theory* (*Einführung in dem Systemtheorie*), published some years after *Trust* and *Power* and which are now available in both languages. We have the added advantage of combining a native German speaker, who now teaches and writes in English, with a native English speaker, who has been involved in several previous translations of Luhmann's books. Most of our discussions together have been devoted to working out how best to capture in accessible English some of the more complex ideas that Luhmann sets out in these books.

Finally there is the major difficulty of vocabulary where Luhmann uses a German word or phrase in a very particular, theoretical way. We have listed these below. There will no doubt be those who disagree with our choice of English to translate the German, so we have explained wherever appropriate the thought processes behind our choices, always giving the German word or phrase so that the readers may consult their own dictionaries and find alternatives which might, in their eyes, be preferable.

Below are some notes on specific points.

Trust

Chapter 1
p. 6: Luhmann refers to 'problems' in the sense of analytical or mathematical problems rather than social problems.

Chapter 2
p. 12: Luhmann uses the words 'Bestand' and 'Bestände' to explain that the continuity of social activities is based on constantly changing events, and events are only made possible because they are provided with a continuity that secures the constant reoccurrence of events. Luhmann is likely to have been influenced by A. N. Whitehead, who developed a very similar conception, but who uses the term 'permanence', without any plural. Luhmann presents a much more self-referential understanding by adding a plural. In order to express this notion, we have decided to use the terms constancy and constancies.
p. 13: It is common to translate the German word 'Sinn' as meaning.