

A review of “Niklas Luhmann and Organization Studies” edited by David Seidl and Kai Helge Becker, published by Liber & Copenhagen Business School Press ISBN 8763001624 (2005)

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Abstract

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Introduction

In Niklas Luhmann’s preface to his *Social Systems* (Luhmann, 1995), he notes the difficulty of writing a complex theory based heavily on abstractions and hopes that “readers will bring with them enough patience, imagination, intelligence and curiosity” to his book. *Social Systems* is described by Kai Helge Becker as Luhmann’s groundbreaking opus magnum and I think most who have read it will agree that it is indeed difficult territory. In contrast *Niklas Luhmann and Organizational Studies* provides an accessible and updated view of Luhmann’s work in organizational studies.

Niklas Luhmann and Organizational Studies (hereafter “NLOS”) consists of seven parts, each containing a number of chapters written by a range of authors, including four chapters written by Luhmann himself. The book was edited by David Seidl and Kai Helge Becker, two well known Luhmann scholars, and is part of the *Advances in Organization Studies*, a series that is intended as a “channel for cutting edge theoretical and empirical works of high quality.”

The four chapters written by Luhmann cover the concept of autopoiesis (Chapter 2), the autopoiesis of social systems (Chapter 3), the paradox of decision making (Chapter 4), and communication barriers in management consulting (Chapter 16). All of these chapters were published previously in German but have been translated into English for this volume. Eight other chapters in the volume have been adapted from papers delivered at the international symposium “Niklas Luhmann and Organization Theory” held in Munich in 2002. The remaining chapters were written specifically for this book.

The titles of the seven parts provide a good overview of the range of the book’s interests: the theory of autopoietic social systems; organization, decision and paradox; organization, interaction and society; Luhmann’s theory in the context of other theories; forms of organization; and implications for management and consulting. The final part includes a glossary of Luhmann’s terminology and an annotated bibliography of selected works relevant to organizational studies.

The book presents several key ideas that form the basis of Luhmann’s approach to organization studies. The book’s introduction, written by Seidl and Becker, provides a good starting point for these key concepts. Some of these key ideas are intriguing and will provide alternative ways of looking at organizations for many readers. Some of these ideas are worth outlining here to give a preview of the ground covered for those not familiar with Luhmann’s work. But before that, it is worth noting the relative difference between the attention given to Luhmann’s work in Germany when compared to the non-German speaking parts of the world. Indeed, a quick review of authors publishing papers related to Luhmann’s work seems to suggest that it is predominantly the English speaking world where Luhmann is still relatively under appreciated. No doubt the delay involved in translating from German to English is part of the reason for this, but the difficulty of translation of complicated ideas must also be a factor. For this reason, the publication of a new and relatively accessible volume in English is a positive event.

The basic concepts of Luhmann’s social theory are outlined in Chapter 1, written by David Seidl. Fittingly, the first concept discussed is the idea of autopoiesis. This is fitting because Luhmann’s adaption of the biological concept of autopoiesis to his social theory is seen as the point that divides his early work from his later work. Luhmann did not simply adopt autopoiesis to his

theory, but instead he adapted it in terms of what Seidl refers to as “a general, transdisciplinary concept of autopoiesis”.

The second basic concept required to understand Luhmann’s theory is his adoption of communicative events as the elementary basis of his sociological theory, and his definition of communicative events as consisting of information, utterance, and understanding as an insoluble unit. This concept has significance in Luhmann’s description of social and physic systems as separate systems and underpins his view that each of these systems paradoxically provides the environment for the other. Communication then is seen as “an emergent property of the interaction between many psychic systems” (NLOS: 29). On the other hand, understanding can be seen as emergent from the involvement of physic systems in many communications over time. This interconnectedness but separation of the physic and social systems is a counter-intuitive but essential part of Luhmann’s social theory.

The third key concept that is ubiquitous throughout the book regards decisions as the basic elements constituting organizations. Having differentiated society, organizations, and (face to face) interactions as different types of social systems, Luhmann’s theory defines decisions as a particular type of communication, describing decisions as communications that “communicate their own contingency” (NLOS: 39). This definition gives rise to a number of related key concepts, such as the inherent paradox in decisions, uncertainty absorption, and decision premises. To some extent these all arise from the connectedness of decisions in a web of communication, where decisions absorb the uncertainty inherent in non-selected options and where all decisions are preceded by other decisions which through their absorption of uncertainty have created particular decision premises for future decisions.

The idea of paradox is central to Luhmann’s social theory, and he quoted Heinz von Foerster as saying “only those questions that are in principle undecidable, we can decide”. The point that Luhmann is making is that if a choice can be made through some form of calculation it is in fact not a decision as there is no choice to make. The paradox here is that “at the heart of every decision there is undecidability” (NLOS: 45).

A final difficult feature in Luhmann’s theory is his reliance on the explanatory force of the calculus of distinctions, based on the work of George Spencer Brown. David Seidl (NLOS: 46) puts forward the view that it is “possible to comprehend Luhmann’s theory of social systems also without Spencer Brown, a deeper appreciation ... presupposes an at least rudimentary familiarity...” I think this is something for each individual reader to decide for themselves.

In addition to Luhmann’s contributions and the chapters that describe Luhmann’s work, a number of papers in NLOS provide a link between Luhmann’s work, the current context of organizational studies, and practice in and about organizations. In particular, three chapters (Chapters 11, 12 and 13) provide interesting descriptions of Luhmann’s system theory in the context of new institutionalism, postmodernism, and network theory.

Overall, this book presents a different viewpoint to other recent approaches to organizational studies, and inevitably will generate some debate about how best to approach organizations from the viewpoint of complexity and systems theory. The lack of acknowledgement of Luhmann’s work in certain areas has already been mentioned and as a case in point *E:CO* itself can be used as an example. Volume 9 Numbers 1-2 of *E:CO* was a special double issue titled “Complexity Thinking & Systems Theory”. Only two of the papers in that volume of *E:CO* referenced Luhmann’s work despite the extent of Luhmann’s work in systems theory and organizations. Hopefully this new volume of papers by Luhmann and about Luhmann’s system theories will provide a greater awareness among *E:CO* readers.

Differences with other recent development in organizational studies can also be seen in Volume 9 Numbers 1-2 of *E:CO*, which contained a review of *A Complexity Perspective on Researching Organizations: Taking Experience Seriously*, by Ralph Stacey and Douglas Griffin. A comparison between NLOS and this book provides some interesting counter-positions and plenty of potential for discussion and debate. Stacey and Griffen (2005) present a view of organizations in terms of “complex responsive processes,” described as “a temporal process theory which, when it comes to understanding human action, argues against systems thinking and its spatial metaphor of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’” ... and “draws on some strands of complexity theory as a source domain for analogies and a principal analogy has to do with interaction.” Later, complex responsive processes are described as “the actions of human bodies as they interact with each other, so constituting the social, and as each interacts, at the same time, with himself or herself, so constituting mind/self.” The similarities with Luhmann’s views on the communicative basis of social systems are clear, but the difference of views over “systems” is also clear.

Hopefully *Niklas Luhmann and Organizational Studies* will provide better access to Luhmann’s work and a counter position to both conventional and emerging approaches to organizational studies. There is already plenty of published views both for and against Luhmann’s system theory, probably because the counter intuitive nature of many of Luhmann’s observations is thought provoking and almost demands a response one way or the other. In my view, this book it is certainly worth the time spent reading it whether you agree with Luhmann or not.

References

1. Luhmann, N. (1995). *Social Systems*, ISBN 9780804726252 (1996).

2. Stacey, R and Griffin, D (2005). A Complexity Perspective on Researching Organizations: Taking Experience Seriously, ISBN 9780415351317