

Chapter 2

Career and Background

Niklas Luhmann was born in Lüneburg (Lower Saxony, Germany) on December 8, 1927. In 1946, he started studying law at the University of Freiburg, where he graduated in 1949. In 1954–55, he worked at the Administrative Court of Appeal in Lüneburg. Then, until 1962, he worked as a jurist in the administration of the federal state (*Land*) of Lower Saxony. In some interviews (Luhmann 1987, pp. 125–134), Luhmann stated that his interest in law started when he was a student, as he was interested in the fundamental conditions determining who is right and who is wrong in judicial disputes. This interest was boosted by the conditions of Germany after the Second World War, in particular by the problem of reconstructing the administration of law and ‘repairing’ the damages caused by Nazism.

Initially, when studying Roman and comparative law, Luhmann was interested in practical problems and in the operational aspects of law. In this period he did not show any interest in academic research, as he saw university as a ‘small place in which everything is simple repetition’, but aimed to become a lawyer. However, he was discouraged by the practical and routine aspects of the profession of lawyer, for example the necessity to meet the many demands of his superiors. Luhmann’s decision to work in the field of administration depended on his need for more freedom. However, even administration became too hard a job, because it did not leave enough time for his new interests in philosophy (above all in Descartes, Kant and Husserl) and anthropology (Malinowsky and Radcliffe-Brown).

From anthropology, he learned about the concept of ‘function’, which was his first theoretical interest. In 1960, he unexpectedly won a scholarship in the field of administration sciences, which allowed him to be a visiting scholar in Science of Administration at Harvard University. Given his scarce interest in studies on administration, however, he turned to sociological studies, as a test to decide whether to continue his career in administration and then follow a political career, or undertake a scientific career. To better understand the concept of function, he contacted the famous American sociologist Talcott Parsons, who worked at Harvard University. Through this contact, Luhmann became aware of his interest in social sciences, in particular in *grand theories*. Eventually, the study of the

concept of function, together with the study of the phenomenological concept of meaning (*Sinn*), led him to opt for a scientific career.

Nevertheless, between 1962 and 1965, he worked in the *Hochschule für Verwaltungswissenschaften* (College of Science of Administration) in Speyer (Germany). In those years, his publications focused mainly on administration and organisation, but in 1962 he published his first theoretical paper in the famous German journal *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, with the title 'Funktion und Kausalität' ('Function and Causality'). This publication marked the beginning of his career as a sociologist and was the first of a series of theoretically oriented papers and volumes.

This first part of Luhmann's life confirms the concept of biography that Luhmann developed later: a collection of coincidences, whose continuity is provided by the sensibility to coincidences. In his case, the chain of coincidences included the political collapse of Germany in 1945, the study of law, and the interest for Husserl and Parsons (Luhmann 1987, p. 134). In 1966, he successfully applied for the University of Münster, where he studied at the *Sozialforschungsstelle* (Centre for Social Research), directed by the famous German sociologist Helmut Schelsky. Here he took his Ph.D. and qualification for professorship (*Habilitation*). In 1968, he took the professorship in sociology at the new University of Bielefeld. When he took a permanent position in Bielefeld as a professor, he was requested to declare what his research project was, how long this was likely to last and how much money he needed for it. As he wrote many years later in the Preface of his work on the Theory of Society (1997), his answers were 'theory of society', '30 years' and 'no costs'.

The most important publications of the first phase of his activity as a sociologist concerned trust (1968) and legitimisation procedures (1969). These very first volumes revealed his innovative approach to sociology. In 1970, he published a collection of the most important papers of the sixties introducing his theoretical and methodological programme under the meaningful title of *Sociological Enlightenment* (*Soziologische Aufklärung*). In 1971, he co-authored a volume that included a debate with Jürgen Habermas, in which he introduced the guidelines of his theoretical proposal. As he wrote in 1997, the title of his section in this volume was paradoxically 'social technology', while Habermas wrote about 'theory of society', which in fact was Luhmann's plan. The unsatisfactory label of 'technology' was suggested to refer to the systemic structure of his work, which originated from research in cybernetics (e.g., the concept of complexity by William Ross Ashby). The 1971 book was a turning point for Luhmann's reputation in Germany and, in the following years, at international level, as it generated significant attention for his theoretical proposal.

In the same year, Luhmann published a book on political planning. In the following years, he systematically increased the quantity and variety of his publications. Among the most important, what is worth mentioning here are the volumes on law (1972), power (1975), religion (1977), and education, the latter co-authored by the German education expert Schorr (1979). Moreover, he published two new

collections of the series *Soziologische Aufklärung*, including his most important papers of the seventies (1975, 1981a).

In the eighties, Luhmann started to pay great attention to the evolution of systems theory, in particular to the new research in so-called second-order cybernetics, introducing in his theory the concepts of self-reference and autopoiesis (see Chap. 3). These concepts were introduced for the first time in a book on the sociology of knowledge, analysing in particular the ways in which important knowledge ('semantics') is related to the structure of society (1980), and were developed in a second book on semantics (1981b), in a volume on politics (1981c), and in another one on the semantics of love (1982). These new concepts soon became part of the core of his most important book of that time, namely the book on the general theory of social systems (1984), which was the first systematic attempt to give a comprehensive account of his theory. Originally conceived as an introduction to the planned Theory of Society, but too voluminous for that purpose, *Soziale Systeme* (*Social Systems*) was defined by Luhmann his first 'real' publication, as the previous ones were part of a 'zero-series' (Luhmann 1987, p. 142). This complex and long book includes all the basic concepts of Social Systems Theory, and highlights its circular and labyrinthine structure. Each concept is defined by reference to the others, without any central pillar of the theory.

In the following years, Luhmann increased his production and publication of papers and books concerning all the most important sociological themes. In this period, he wrote a book on the problems of ecological communication (1986), he published two new collections of papers in the series *Soziologische Aufklärung* (1987a, 1990a), a new book concerning the sociology of knowledge (1989), new volumes on specific social systems, including economics (1988a), science (1990b), and law (1993), two volumes dedicated to epistemology, respectively of knowledge (1988b) and observation (1992a), and a book on the concept of risk (1992b), which opened a new important area of his sociological interest. In 1992, Luhmann published an Italian, preliminary version of a theory of society, in collaboration with the Italian sociologist Raffaele De Giorgi, who invited him to the University of Lecce for a period of time.

In those years, Luhmann also obtained a great number of academic awards, including several honorary degrees and the Hegel prize (in 1989). Luhmann taught in Bielefeld until 1993, when he retired and was appointed Professor Emeritus. After his retirement, however, Luhmann continued to expand his theoretical project and to be influential in the sociological field.

In the period following his retirement, Luhmann published the sixth and last volume of the series *Soziologische Aufklärung* (1995b), the fourth volume on semantics and the structure of society (1995c), new books on specific social systems, namely art (1995a) and mass media (1996), which were both translated in English in 2000. In 1997, he published the final version of his theory of society, in two volumes, accomplishing the original project he had when he started to work at Bielefeld.

Luhmann died on November 6, 1998, few days before his 71st birthday, after a long illness. After his death, more works were published, including the unfinished

books on subsystems of modern society, e.g. politics (2000), a second book on religion (2000), and, last but not least, a book on education (2002).

Luhmann was one of the most prolific scholar in the history of Western thought. Many of his books were translated in several languages, and his popularity spread from the United States and Brazil to Korea and Japan. The first approach to Luhmann's theory in English was the translation of a book that put together his works on trust and power (1979). In 1982, a collection of Luhmann's first important essays was published with the title 'Differentiation of Society'. This book boosted the translation of Luhmann's works. The book on the law system was translated in 1985, the book on love in 1986, the book on ecological communication in 1989, the second book on politics in 1990, and the book on risk in 1993. In the same year, Luhmann's new conceptualisation of self-reference was made available in English, through a collection of essays ('Essays on self-reference'). The translation of the book on Social Systems was published in 1995, and it was followed by the translation of the book on the epistemology of observation (1998). In 2000, the book on education co-authored with Schorr was also translated in English, with a considerable delay. In the same year, the books on art and mass media as social systems were also translated. In 2004, the book on the law system was translated. The two volumes on the theory of society were translated in English much later, in 2012 and 2013. Finally, in 2013, the unfinished book on religion as a social system was also translated. Moreover, in the past decade, several volumes have been dedicated to his theory. However, the first volume on Luhmann's theory was a glossary of its most important terms, which was originally published in Italian with Luhmann's preface (Baraldi et al. 1989/1995), then translated in Spanish (1996), in German (1997) and in Japanese (2013) (a translation in Korean and a new edition in English are forthcoming).

Luhmann left a great number of unpublished materials, which in the meantime have been, and are still being, published, and a famous card index, in which he used to store any idea that came to his mind and all relevant details of his readings, regardless of their possible future relevance (he described this index as an 'alter ego' in Luhmann 1981; see also Luhmann 1987, pp. 142–145). The index is not linear, but is rather a 'spiderweb-shaped' system, which can be arranged arbitrarily. Nevertheless, or possibly precisely for this reason, and thanks to the internal cross-references, it soon developed an internal, not casual structure. The perfect organisation of these notes, taken in many years of work, allowed him to write quickly and precisely on an extraordinarily large number of themes, although the system costed him 'more time than writing books' (Luhmann 1987, p. 143).

Luhmann was a very versatile sociologist. In fact, his theoretical interests coincided with the discipline. One remarkable characteristic of his career as a sociologist is that he never abandoned the framework and the general concepts he employed when he started to explore social phenomena. He remained loyal to his project of a theory of society for his entire life, eventually achieving it. However, he also reformulated many of his concepts, updating them according to theoretical advancements. Moreover, he progressively added new concepts to his theory, integrating them with the old ones.

In this book we do not aim to reconstruct the long history of Luhmann's thought, but rather to provide an account of the core elements of his theory. For this purpose, we shall use the latest versions in which these elements were formulated, which was, in Luhmann's intentions, the most accurate version. We will include the integration of old and new concepts, without distinguishing between them and providing a picture of Luhmann's complex theory with particular attention to his effort to explain education as a social system.



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