
Gianfranco Poggi
University of Edinburgh


Niklas Luhmann, Professor of Sociology at the University of Bielefeld since its establishment in 1968, and certainly one among the top five sociologists now active in Germany, is as yet little known outside his country. There are three main reasons for this: his commitment to a strenuously conceptual, intellectually very demanding approach to theory-building; his writing style, which Germans also find difficult, and is liable to “throw” the hardiest translator; and the rule apparently observed on the social science publishing market, according to which even second-rate Marxisant writers get translated before first-rate non-Marxist ones. Ironically, in fact, the first event to give Luhmann’s name some international resonance (for example, by getting him translated into Italian) was probably Jurgen Habermas’ decision, a few years back, to have it out with him on the scientific and ideological significance of Luhmann’s own variety of functional systems theory. Together Habermas and Luhmann produced an extraordinary, truly dialogical book (Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie; Suhrkamp, 1971) which unmistakably signaled, even to audiences previously undisposed to bother with him, that Luhmann was indeed a man to reckon with.

Not that the reckoning is easy. As I have indicated, Luhmann is a taxing writer; he is also a prodigiously productive one, and one with an astonishing thematic range and formidable resources of diverse scholarship. Finally, his theoretical approach, capable as it is of powerful and subtle elaboration at the master’s hands, is also unerringly consistent (“monomaniacal,” some critics have said) in its basic inspiration, and at length provokes in the reader a kind of wary and weary wonderment.

Here I cannot illustrate that basic inspiration, demonstrate the wealth of insights which Luhmann draws from it, or spell out the reasons for the persistent unease the whole enterprise generates in me. But perhaps a short account of this recent book on power by Luhmann (though, I would wager, not the most recent by the time this review will appear) might give the reader some notion of what kind of pudding is being produced at Bielefeld.

The problem around which Luhmann’s whole enterprise revolves is the discrepancy between on the one hand the severalness, complexity, and contingency of reality, and on the other the very restricted human capacity for consciously attending and responding to that reality. Being themselves a product of the increase in the differentiation and complexity of nature intrinsic to the evolutionary process, human beings must sustain their existence not by eliminating complexity, but by reducing it through system formation. That is: by countering the threatening boundlessness and overwhelming complexity of raw experiential givens by constructing them into a plurality of overlapping “islands of lower complexity,” of manageable, bounded sets of selected aspects of reality. The most distinctive way of constructing such
progressively more differentiated and contingent systems is by elaborating and transmitting meaning(s).

Until the early seventies Luhmann’s work has dealt mainly with the processes of system formation, the properties of all systems or of classes of them, the identifying characteristics and modes of operation of specific systems and other “mechanisms for the reduction of complexity.” Since that time he has mainly concerned himself with the ways in which meaningful selections, operated through action (Handeln) or experience (Erleben) within one system (or by one actor), get transmitted to, and made operative for, other systems (or actors). Necessarily involved here (particularly at the societal level of analysis) is the operation of some differentiated media of communication.

Power, the topic of this book, is one such medium—others being truth, money, and love. Power is involved whenever selections-through-action become operative for one another as between two systems (or actors) by virtue of the following asymmetry: both parties want to avoid certain action alternatives (typically, the application of negative sanctions, the exercise of coercion), but one of them is rather more willing and able to pursue those alternatives, if pushed to it, than the other is. Thus power, being constituted by that asymmetry, is essentially relational; it is intrinsically potential, in that the possibility of coercion constitutes it while its exercise liquidates it as a power. Its magnitude varies primarily as the range, and thus the degree of contingency and selectivity of alternative courses of action open to both parties. In its essence power means that one party controls the other’s selections, and can make more probable those otherwise less probable; thus it should not be conceptualized primarily as a causal mechanism producing individual concrete effects by overcoming resistance. In fact power need not meet resistance, and is all the more significant when it does not.

As a communication medium, power operates as a symbolic, binary code. Symbolic, because it can only influence selections at the receiving end by abstracting and generalizing those aspects of the selections at the other end which are to guide the former; binary, insofar as it necessarily involves a reference to the above asymmetry, or (more crudely) to the dichotomy Strength/Weakness. Luhmann has many interesting things to say about what he calls the “double-coding” of power through the dichotomy Lawful/Unlawful: but he acknowledges that power does not necessarily cease to be such on account of being unlawful, and that its distinctive potentiality could in fact be negated by a thoroughly effective “juridicization.”

The distinctive evolutionary advantages of power as a facility for bringing about otherwise unlikely combinations of selections-through-action (the locus for the development of all communications media is for Luhmann a societal system large and complex enough that it can no longer ensure enough coordination purely on an interactional or customary basis), are paid for by corresponding “power risks.” The risk most discussed by political theorists is that power be abused; but Luhmann is more concerned by what he sees as a tendency for power to fail to realize its own potentialities; along the chain of power, however, countervailing power may form, leading sometimes to policy stalemates; or decisional centers may fail to operate effectively through demand overload. Luhmann discusses these phenomena occasionally with reference to the contemporary state, and more purposefully in a final chapter dealing with power in organizations.
As the reader may have gathered even from this inadequate account, Luhmann’s main intent is to reconceptualize and set within a comprehensive and distinctive theoretical framework arguments and findings many of which are fairly well-known. In this, as in other ways, Luhmann significantly resembles Parsons, but he also differs from him substantially. For instance, he criticizes Parsons’ overly “architectonic” approach to theory-building, and rejects his systematic over-reliance upon normative and value factors. Also, unlike Parsons, Luhmann is a very tough-minded thinker, with a shrewd and informed understanding of the contemporary realities-on-the-ground of politics and administration.

The question, with work of this nature, is: how much distinctively new insight is being generated? As far as this book is concerned, the answer must be: much, but not very much. Though in many ways it demonstrates Luhmann’s outstanding talents (among others, a stunning command of the vast international literature on power), this book lends itself to some criticism on its own terms, that is apart from objections one might raise against Luhmann’s overall theoretical perspective. The main reason why it is not wholly successful, in my view, is that it really constitutes one chapter from what one might call a serial treatise, that is one which Luhmann is producing in the form of a series of lengthy essays and shorter books. It is useful to Luhmann to publish his treatise in this fashion, since the feedback generated by each essay or book can inspire or improve those yet in the works. But the individual product tends to be somewhat elliptical, lacing as it does (when read as a self-standing book or essay) the hinterland constituted by the others, and which it needs to be fully made sense of.

Also, since this is the first lengthy piece to appear on the theme of the communication media, too much of its argument deals with what all media have in common (some chapters treat money or truth almost as extensively as they do power). Furthermore it does not deal systematically with the relations between individual media; it left me quite unclear, for instance, as to exactly how the uses of money as a separate medium relate to its uses as a power-bearing.

Thus, Macht would not constitute a good point-of-entry for readers determined to improve their sociology (and stretch their German) by coming to terms with Luhmann. One might start rather with some of the essays in Soziologische Aufklärung (2nd ed., Westdeutscher, 1972) or with the lengthier (and more arduous) pieces in the Habermas-Luhmann book, or with the first few chapters in Vertrauen: Ein Mechanismus der Reduktion sozialer Komplexität (2nd ed., Enke, 1973). Only after thus grasping Luhmann’s main message will one be able to evaluate properly, and possibly make full use of, his discussion of power in this book.


Joseph R. Gusfield
University of California, San Diego


There is a belief among sociologists and others that the talk in bars and taxicabs is somehow truer and more revealing than the conversation of work, home, or interview. In this study, E. E. LeMasters reports on his three years as a patron