INTRODUCTION

CONTEMPORARY
SOCIAL SYSTEM THEORY

Each individual member of a social group processes thoughts and interprets the world in a completely private manner, yet moments of mutual understanding seem to occur on a regular basis. A man shows a ring, and a woman says (with some luck), “yes.” A pistol is displayed, and a wallet is sacrificed. A ball is kicked into a net, and a crowd roars. The ring, pistol, wallet, ball, net, and the men and women acting may all be said to exist in the world, but their reality as objects does not determine what these things will mean to different people. Though they may perceive the same objects, people develop a sense for the meaning of things in the world entirely on their own terms. What can explain why two people would ever agree that a ring indicates a proposal, a wallet keeps a pistol quiet, and a ball entering a net produces both triumph and defeat in the same instant? The achievement of shared understanding among different minds is highly improbable and requires a sociological explanation. Members of groups learn to assume that other members will condition
themselves through the independent observation of society to associate certain objects and behaviors with certain meanings. Thus, as we suggest in this book, it is society that produces meaning and understanding for its participants.

Sociologists typically explain understanding between people by pointing to a nebulous process known as “socialization.” Supposedly, society enters into the minds of its participants, culturing the raw state of their human consciousness. In the natural state, people are mentally disassociated; but the socialization process organizes and unifies their thoughts. In one leading introductory textbook to sociology, for instance, we learn: “Socialization is the process whereby the helpless infant gradually becomes a self-aware, knowledgeable person, skilled in the ways of the culture into which he or she was born” (Giddens, Duneier and Appelbaum 2007:92). Humans are born into a culture, as it were, and this common experience slowly transforms them into members of society. Thus, the miracle of societal members understanding each other can be explained by their being born into the same culture. This traditional account of socialization leaves many important questions unanswered. For example, does the infant find itself inside a culture from the moment of its birth, all at once? Can a person leave one culture and be “reborn” into another one? Are people born into two different cultures inherently unable to understand one another? And why is it that people born into the same culture sometimes misunderstand each other?

The concept of socialization implies that people understand one another because the same society is literally “inside” them, or that the people are inside of the same society. The “process of socialization” might initially appear to explain how people learn to understand each other, but only if we accept two rather dissatisfying conditions. First, we must substitute the problem of how society gets “inside” its members for a different problem: how people are born into the same culture. Second, we must overlook the problem that mainstream sociology has not effectively defined society or determined its boundaries. How can people be in or out of a space that has not yet been delineated? Anthony Giddens and
his colleagues, explaining to students beginning the study of sociology, say: “A society is a system of interrelationships that connects individuals together. No culture could exist without a society; and equally, no society could exist without culture” (2007:59). This definition ties society to a “system of interrelationships” between individuals, and also proposes that society and culture are interdependent. But what is the difference between society and culture? If we accept that individuals are born into the same culture, why do we need a concept of society? If society refers to a system of interrelationships between people, what specific difference does culture make? And exactly how do these different “interrelationships” become part of a single system?

Sociologists have acquired the habit of using terms such as society and culture without defining them in a disciplined and scientific manner. “Once it escapes the everyday world of ethnography and ethnomethodology,” Dorothy Smith argued, “sociology’s characteristic lexical practices allow it to float free of any actuality capable of constituting a common ground of reference” (2001:165). Smith asserted that it is easy to make fun of the way sociology has developed an appetite for “non-observable” concepts that are assumed to exist without requiring a clear reference or any additional intellectual worries, supported only by what she calls a “blob-ontology.” Too often, with their most basic terms in such a muddled state, sociologists have been unable to account for the relationship between individuals and society. The problem of how people use society to manage one another’s understanding of objects, actions, and events remains unsolved. We suggest it is time for a dramatic paradigm shift in sociology. Traditionally, sociologists have focused their attention on people, actors, agents, human subjects, and actions. This book departs from that well-worn path and instead turns to contemporary social system theory and an analysis of society comprised of units of communication. By “observing society,” we mean observing the conditions under which communication accomplishes an understanding that allows for further communication and the reproduction of society as a social system.
AN INTRODUCTION TO CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL SYSTEM THEORY

This book offers a basic introduction to a contemporary theory of social systems, as developed by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann and other contributors. Social system theory describes society as an autopoietic, self-organizing system that does not include human beings. By using the term autopoiesis, a term adapted from the biologist Humberto Maturana (1981), social system theory asserts that society is a closed social system that produces itself and its environment by recursively connecting its own elements, by establishing selective relations between its ongoing communicative operations. As life produces life, society produces society. Society organizes its elements according to its own logic, selectively steering itself into an open future by meaningfully connecting operation after operation. In this book, we explore the multidisciplinary roots of this new paradigm and assess its tremendous potential to redirect sociological reflection.

Contemporary social system theory creatively builds upon the classical theory of general systems, as developed by Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1950, 1968) and imported into sociology by Talcott Parsons and his colleagues (Parsons 1951, 1963; Parsons and Shils 1951). Modern social system theory incorporates fresh insights gained from cognitive biology, the philosophy of consciousness, phenomenology, distinction theory, socio-cybernetics, and constructivism. The theory maintains that observers recursively self-construct everything that is meaningful in the world, beginning with the difference between themselves and their environment. They use this difference to self-referentially process changes in their environment in the form of other-reference, as if information were externally available. Consulting other-reference, an observer is able to make informed decisions while selectively performing operations. The identity of observer may be attributed to individual people, interaction groups, organizations, functionally differentiated systems (such as the economy, politics, law, and religion), and to society itself. Social system theory is concerned with the second-order observation of differences, distinctions, relations, and boundaries—it is not interested in defining essences, laws,
values, or ontology. This makes contemporary social system theory very
different from both the general systems approach of the 1950’s and from
other mainstream sociological paradigms.

Within social system theory, individual human observers are viewed as
psychic systems, self-conscious unities of thoughts that are operationally
closed to everything outside of consciousness. Thoughts remain trapped
inside each individual’s awareness and cannot make a difference or take
the form of information outside of the mind. To participate in society,
psychic systems assert themselves as part of the environment of com-
munication. The theory criticizes sociological paradigms that attempt to
solve the problems of operational closure and double contingency with
presumptions of intersubjectivity, collective conscience, communicative
rationality, or normative consensus. There is no inherent order that sup-
ports modern society or guarantees understanding among humans. Social
system theory emphasizes the improbability of successful communica-
tion and yet explains how society still manages to reproduce itself.

In this book, we depict modern society as a complex unity with func-
tionally differentiated parts. Various societal systems (the family, the
economy, politics, religion, science, art, and others) produce and organize
special forms of differentiated communication that may be distinguished
by their own self-constructed boundaries. Each societal system functions
in an exclusive way, seeking only to combine its own problems and solu-
tions. Every social operation, however, happens inside the boundary of
communication. Social system theory unravels this paradox of unity in dif-
fERENCE by depicting society not as a whole composed of parts, but rather
as the difference between everything that is communicated and everything
that is not. Sociology, from the perspective of social system theory, is the
science devoted to describing and understanding the second-order obser-
vations of observers of society. Sociologists observe participants in soci-
ety to understand how participants observe communication processing
meaning to recursively index differences in the world, maintain its various
boundaries, and construct the information used in its selective operations.

Contemporary social system theory offers a highly original descrip-
tion of modern social conditions and the possibilities of communication.
There is no possible way to scientifically describe the observation of society as a whole because the complexity of functional differentiation removes any operational center from the social world. Every perspective yields useful information only by closing itself, by selecting and limiting its field of view. Variety, restriction, and self-referential closure set contingent parameters for making multiple forms of meaning in a world society that offers no all-encompassing Archimedean vantage point. With the continued autopoiesis of modern communication, society observes its own distinctions in a decentralized and polycontextural manner. The future of communication is open, therefore, because society has closed itself.

This theory of society presents itself as the key to what Niklas Luhmann called a “sociological enlightenment” that will bring social thought out of “the Dark Ages” of anthropocentrism, social ontology, and normative social philosophy. In this book we explain why Luhmann and other social system theorists argued that sociologists have continually failed to produce an adequate theory of society. Orthodox sociologists occasionally use “theory” to help organize research and account for a myriad of empirical data. However, theorists spend most of their time interpreting and reinterpreting “classical” treatises, as if sociologists could understand society by studying their own revered texts. When it comes to theory, traditional sociology is a quagmire of competing grand narratives, none of which offers a generally useful concept of the unity of society. The discipline has assembled a small collection of favorite theories, including conflict theory, functionalism, rational choice, feminism, symbolic interactionism, and others. Students in introductory sociology courses are faithfully instructed in the canonical “paradigms of the masters,” an enculturation process that only intensifies in graduate school. With so many divergent theories in use, it can be difficult for students to see any semblance of an integrated approach within the discipline. Indeed, it is often difficult to find consensus even within each of the most popular theory camps.

We believe that sociologists have trouble making sense out of one another’s work because they lack a systematic way of describing what
they see in the social world. And when sociologists try to explain their observations to non-sociologists, they are often accused of merely wrapping up common sense in an overly complicated package. In this book, we demonstrate that sociologists can use the same concepts from social system theory to describe very different aspects of society. They can communicate their findings using a common theoretical vocabulary, even while describing how the distinctions they employ are limited, contingent, and self-constructed. Supported by a transparent epistemology, the concepts used by social system theorists are compelling because they can be applied universally, to all parts of society, even to sociology itself. Dispensing with the old grand narratives and profiting from recent advances in other fields of inquiry, contemporary social system theory extends the reach and increases the descriptive power of sociological discourse. As a consequence, social system theory promises to increase sociology’s plausibility as a science, its research productivity, its connection to other disciplines, and its resonance with the public.

The Structure of This Book

This book is comprised of eight chapters. It begins with an epistemological account of observation that entails the drawing of a distinction and the indication of one side or another. Observing requires one to imagine differences such as system and environment, actual and potential, form and medium, information and utterance, or language and noise. Imagining a distinction sets the stage for an observer to meaningfully indicate or select a preference from a menu of alternatives. Sociologists are already familiar with the nature of scientific observation and with the methodology of participant observation, but our use of the term may come as a surprise. Social system theory takes a very precise approach to the problem of observing and extends this novel perspective throughout its reach. Our initial discussion specifies the influence of George Spencer Brown and relates his logic of observation to the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, the constructivism of Heinz von Foerster, and to the sociological work of other relevant thinkers. In this first chapter, we also
present definitions of information, meaning, recursion, and culture that will be used throughout the book.

In the second chapter, we define Niklas Luhmann’s path-breaking conception of communication as an “improbable” synthesis of information, utterance, and understanding. A focus on communication as the unit of sociological analysis is revolutionary. For readers well versed in traditional sociology, this chapter may be difficult to digest because it ultimately breaks with established patterns of analysis. It also substantially modifies Claude Shannon’s and Warren Weaver’s famous model of communication, in which information is transmitted between a sender and a receiver (1949). We sincerely hope that any difficulties readers experience will be tied to the intellectual controversy over how sociologists ought to define their subject matter, rather than to our efforts to present the theory in a comprehensible manner. The idea that communication must be observed as a synthesis of three distinct selections is theoretically complex and for this reason we have included many illustrations and practical examples.

Social system theory places the problem of understanding at the heart of every investigation. In chapter 3, we outline the contours of a basic problem: people have different brains, so how is understanding among members of a group possible? To provide a sociological context, from which our theory eventually emerges, we critically evaluate a diversity of theories about how members of society share “intersubjectivity.” We also show that pioneering sociologists focused a lot of attention upon the power of communication to cultivate forms of subjectivity and inform social meaning, but their work has failed to establish an adequate and integrated theory of how society produces understanding for its observers.

In chapter 4, we describe language as a medium of communication. Building on the previous discussion of how each observation involves a two-sided distinction, we explain that all communicative operations make use of the binary structure of language. Although it is a highly improbable contrivance, language works because it takes form within the medium of acoustic or optical noise and can therefore serve as a structural coupling between different people. To convey information to an
observer, of course, language must also represent more than perceived noise. By participating in verbal communication, participants learn to draw a distinction between organized and unorganized noise. Language is used to code world events and meaning. Furthermore, it doubles all events and all meaning. Everything that can be said, can be said in a positive or in a negative way: in a sentence using “no,” or in a sentence using “yes.” Language itself is coded using this basic binary structure, a decisive characteristic when it comes to communicative innovation and, in the long run, to social evolution. To clarify the unique qualities of language, we compare and contrast noise-specification in humans and animals and discuss the human voice box from an evolutionary perspective.

Social system theory explains how communication increases its ability to successfully establish different kinds of connections by constructing symbolically generalized media or success media, as we explain in chapter 5. Symbolically generalized media help participants in society assess and manage the contingencies of one another’s motivations. The use of symbolically generalized media appears to “cause” the acceptance of communicated propositions. We focus our discussion on four success media: love, power, truth, and money. We conclude the chapter by relating the differentiation of success media to the differentiation of symbiotic mechanisms that structurally couple society and human bodies.

Contemporary social system theory describes society as the overarching system that includes all communication. On the one hand, the all-encompassing unity of society cannot be observed, but it can be delineated clearly in terms of the theory. On the other hand, very small “ephemeral, trivial, short lived” social systems may appear whenever observers rely on the autopoiesis of communication to cope with the experience of double contingency (Luhmann 1997a:812). We distinguish three types of relatively stable social systems in chapter 6, each one drawing a distinction between itself and its environment by means of an exclusive distinction between system and environment. Interactions are observable as the most immediate social systems and include partners in communication who are present for one another. Organizations are observed as social systems comprised of decisions made within
a network of members. Finally, societal systems are functionally differentiated channels of communication that pursue operations that refer to a specific problem area of society, such as the economy, law, education, religion, science, and the family.

In chapter 7, we further develop the construct of social differentiation by describing four forms in which society may turn inward and internally differentiate itself: as segmented, center/periphery, stratified, and functionally differentiated communication. In this sense, we compare increasingly complex alternative forms in which society may observe the possibilities for continuing and reproducing its unity. A form of society organizes and selects sequential elements of communication by observing a working distinction, but this distinction may change as time passes, conditions change, and society evolves. Segmented, or tribal, society is the oldest and simplest form, analogous to Emile Durkheim’s “mechanical” society (1964), Ferdinand Toennies’ “Gemeinschaft” (2001), and Robert Redfield’s notion of “primitive” society (1953). The form of society increases in internal complexity when communication is differentiated according to the distinction between center and periphery. Stratified society, as Max Weber (1972) nearly suggested with his concept of “status group,” organizes communication in terms of position within a stratification scheme, making reference to a socially established hierarchy. Finally, in functionally differentiated modern society, communication is organized according to its function. As it continues to evolve, society may establish other patterns of connections, but these four forms have reproduced themselves with consistency.

As with any other sociological theory, contemporary social system theory must demonstrate an ability to contribute to a method that effectively supports scientific inquiry. In our final chapter we observe social system theory and evaluate its potential to inform empirical research. We argue that the traditional form of the datum (datum/variable and constant) is the fundamental form used in scientific observation. Any useful social system theoretical analysis depends on a method that can specify the form of the datum and describe how its “empirical” variety is conditioned. Qualitative methods such as interviewing, content analysis, discourse
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analysis, and ethnography have been productively used by social system theorists. However, we outline Luhmann’s pioneering functional and comparative method that is uniquely relevant for observing how communication selects and relates its own problems and solutions. Drawing a distinction between problem and solution recreates the familiar two-sided form of the datum: marking variables and their possible actualizations on one side, while indicating constants on the other. Observing society, the quintessential problem system, construct and selectively connect its differentiated problems and solutions necessarily integrates theory and method. The functional method, we believe, has the greatest potential for demonstrating the value of social system theory’s resources.

THE ATTRACTION OF SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

We were motivated to write this book by a number of different interests. The incredible work of Niklas Luhmann has yet to be appreciated outside of the German speaking world. Part of the problem is that many of his texts, including his capstone work, Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft (The Society of Society), have yet to be translated into English. Another part of the problem is the challenge of interpreting his creative and highly abstract ideas. “Complicated conceptual relationships of this kind,” Luhmann asserted, “may intimidate sociologists” (1995a:488). Both the authors of the present work have taught social system theory in the United States and Germany and we have seen even our most capable students fall into a state of despair after spending time reading Luhmann. In German, and in English, as within any other tongue, it takes time to learn the language of the theory. Luhmann is the first to admit that his writing is not easy to digest. His use of highly abstract concepts seems to serve as a way of warning readers not to speed along without realizing just how much he wants to adjust the sociological imagination and its resources. He wanted clear and decisive new concepts, new ways to connect ideas, and a new way of disciplining sociology. We try to convey Luhmann’s ideas without losing their inventive and sophisticated quality. Our intention is to
present the theory to a larger audience, to students in particular, without sacrificing authenticity and intellectual depth. Our strategy incorporates three techniques: we allow Luhmann and other contributors to speak in their own words as often as possible, we consistently name components of the theory so that they may be easily recognized in successive chapters and also traced back to their original sources, and we illustrate difficult concepts with clear and accessible examples. We hope that this book will provide a foundation upon which readers may build, whether they decide to contribute to the theory or search for another way to develop sociological thought.

We believe that social system theory solves important problems that have long confounded sociological theorists. The distinction between microscopic and macroscopic sociological analysis, for instance, has divided theorists into relatively autonomous and mutually resistant camps. Although several influential sociologists have attempted to integrate, synthesize, or form linkages between micro- and macro-level analysis (Alexander et al. 1987), the conceptual tools and methodologies that could support constructive conversations within the discipline have proven elusive so far. Jeffrey Alexander, for example, proposed a general theory that “allows us to link action more closely to meaning as actors themselves experience it and to the cultural forms” that structure meaning (1998:220); but he ended championing a collectivist and normative perspective and rejecting micro- or individual-level analysis (1985). Randall Collins proposed another general theory; but he ended up describing himself as a radical micro-sociologist. All macro-level social phenomena, he asserted, can be traced to interaction ritual chains produced at the micro level (1981; 2005). We could discuss other attempts to integrate micro- and macro-level analysis, but our interest is limited to explaining how social system theorists aim to observe communication at every level of analysis, from the dyad to world society, and from interactions to organizations and functional systems of society. One must always select the social system to observe, but the theory has no inherent preference for micro or macro levels of analysis. Every system is observed at the same level of abstraction and described with the same theoretical resources. In addition, social system theory explains how social
structure and agency—a duality that has proven so difficult for sociologists to conceptualize—emerge together in the same instant. There are no communicative structures without actors, and no actors without structures of communication. Society creates “the people” who produce it. The thorny relationship between the individual and society is also neatly resolved by social system theory. Sociology has never been able to explain how participants enter or become part of society. The theory at hand does not try to do so; society is possible because participants never become part of it. At this point, we can only hint at how the innovative positions explained in this book will enhance sociological theory, but this will be fully explained in subsequent chapters.

Finally, we were also motivated to share social system theory with readers because we find sociological theory a fascinating, exciting, and worthwhile intellectual adventure. Without even having a definition of society, sociology has made significant contributions to our understanding of the differences resulting from the division of labor, secularization, urbanization, democracy, and other social phenomena. Contemporary society poses many new challenges for sociology that cannot be met with the old familiar resources. Sociologists have responded in a variety of ways, producing texts that offer moral guidance, journalistic reports, political commentary, narratives of identity, demographic descriptions, and new and improved interpretations of the discipline’s founding writers. By contrast, social system theory offers clear concepts, a promising research agenda, and a cutting edge description of modern society. We believe that the theory can support a sociology that can speak to emerging trends in a more powerful, confident, and authoritative voice. Students are irritated (understandably) by sociologists who address endless contemporary phenomena for which they have no words of their own: globalization, digital media, virtual communities, transnational epidemics, cyberterrorism, chemically augmented personalities, cyborgs, the digital divide, information overload, technological risk management, postindustrialism, and many others. Using the resources of social system theory, sociology can investigate these aspects of modernity on its own terms, building its own self-reference, without resorting to poorly imitating the discourse of other
disciplines. Sociological investigations can stay centered on communication and reveal how society organizes variety, selects variation, and stabilizes forms of meaning. We are interested in promoting social system theory because we have found no comparable alternative for stimulating and supporting our interest in the observation of contemporary society.