

Diskussion *Discussion*

(Mis)readings of Luhmann? Reply to Robert Seyfert

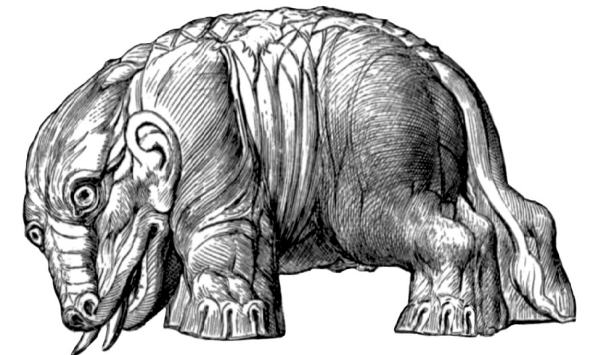
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This reply to Robert Seyfert's essay "The Problem of Order and the Specter of Chaos" (<http://ojs.ub.uni-freiburg.de/behemoth/article/view/776/706>) scrutinizes Seyfert's critique of Systems Theory and highlights some misunderstandings that, in the author's opinion, affect Seyfert's critique of Niklas Luhmann. Two major points are addressed: Hobbes' alleged importance for Luhmann, and Seyfert's reading of Luhmann. A critical response by Robert Seyfert to Moritz Mutter's reply can also be found in this issue of Behemoth.

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In the previous issue of *Behemoth*, Robert Seyfert conducted a critique of Systems Theory that embarks upon a supposedly misguided reading of Thomas Hobbes by Talcott Parsons and Niklas Luhmann (Seyfert 2014). Such “(Mis)readings of Hobbes” (148), as Seyfert calls them, may be the case for Parsons, but are implausible for Luhmann for two separate reasons:

1. It is doubtful that Hobbes plays such a central role in Luhmann’s work that any conclusions at all can be drawn by a critique of his reading of Hobbes.
2. Seyfert’s reading of Luhmann is itself imprecise and misleading to an extent which voids Seyfert’s critique at least partially.

Ad 1: Seyfert deduces the relevance of the question “How is social order possible?” for Systems Theory directly from Thomas Hobbes’ political theory. Luhmann, however, not only links the question explicitly to sociology as an established modern science, he also explicitly refutes the importance of Hobbes: sociology, for Luhmann, does not concern itself with the “‘Hobbesian problem of order’ (Parsons)” (Luhmann 1993, 284). It may also be noted that Durkheim’s sociology is based on a critique of social contract theories. Parsons, too, doubts Hobbes’ solution – which seems implausible and contradictory to him –, but Luhmann refutes the problem itself in its Hobbesian form. For the problem to be investigated correctly, it needs to be transformed into a specifically sociological form, which means leaving behind the Hobbesian form. As Gerhard Wagner puts it: “Ultimately, Parsons doesn’t even give a sociological answer to the problem of order.” (Wagner 1991, 122, transl. by M. M.) How can a specifically sociological form of the problem be described?

For Luhmann, two elements are central: the sociological problem of order combines two problems, the problem of relations of persons and the problem of temporal stability of social structures (Luhmann 1993, 208). It is obvious that Hobbes is mainly interested in the first of these two problems. If Hobbes is concerned with temporal stability of orders, the problem stays linked to the proper time of passion-driven individuals that produce instability by their orientation on the future. In an ironic imitation of the scientific pathos of Comte and Durkheim, Luhmann calls the question “How is social order possible?” “purely scientific [...] because it doesn’t ask for the possibility of a fact where everyday evidence would suffice to know that order is possible; and it doesn’t ask if order is possible, but how it is possible.” With this comes the assertion that the question nonetheless is too

“highly aggregated” to be answered directly, “without relying on premises that themselves presuppose social order.” (Both Luhmann 1993, 208, transl. by M. M.) In two regards, these quotes show that Luhmann is in no way scared of a “specter of chaos”: firstly, he views the problem of social order as an always already solved one and *thus* as a scientific problem; and secondly, he views the concept of a pre-social state of nature as purely a fiction that itself already requires social order. No “specter of chaos” haunts Luhmann’s theory.

The second element is related to the claim that a sociological attempt to address the problem of social order would have to keep away from three traditional and deficient strategies in dealing with the problem: it shall neither rely on a *petitio principii*, nor on a metaphor, nor on a model theory (e.g. the social contract). All these attempts tackle the problem on a too general level, which is the reason why they have to depend on premises that they cannot defend, neither theoretically nor empirically. (Luhmann 1993, 211) This principal insufficiency is joined by the fact that one component of the problem is always abandoned in these attempts. It is, for Luhmann, the specific task of a sociological theory of society to segment the question and to process it *from there*, but nevertheless to always keep the two segments *in relation to each other*.

That is the general outline of the Luhmannian problem of order. In the context of my reply, it is yet even more important to focus on the fact that Luhmann *does not* unconditionally follow the notion that the question of social order is the core of sociology. (Yet Robert Seyfert seems to believe exactly that, cf. 141.) Even in the introduction of his article, Luhmann distances himself rhetorically: “[...] a problem *that has been said to constitute sociology as a scientific discipline*.” (Luhmann 1993, 195, emph. and transl. by M. M.) The question of order, Luhmann continues, can serve to “symbolize the unity of sociology by way of an ultimate theoretical point of reference.” (Luhmann 1993, 208) Yet: as a general question, it is not operational. A critique – like Seyfert’s – that takes its departure from the notion of the problem of order as the core of sociology fails to grasp Luhmann’s point at least partially.

If one were willing to answer the question of how social order is possible in the most general way available to Systems Theory, the answer would, quite simply, have to be: through self-organization. Even the most hard-boiled cyberneticist wouldn’t be satisfied with that. Luhmann’s approach, on the other hand, is quite different: a transposition “through tiny, controllable steps in research programmes”. (Luhmann 1993, 285, transl. by M. M.) So, Seyfert’s basic premise: “Niklas Luhmann

has argued that ‘How is social order possible?’ is *the* leading question of sociology” (141), is partially misleading if “leading question” is understood as an *operational* research question. That is not the case with Luhmann; he merely speaks of a “basic problem” to which sociology needs to stay oriented without falling for the temptations of easy *ad-hoc* solutions. Only in this way can the question form a “discipline-constituting unity”(Luhmann 1993, 285): “Only a scheme of decomposition can provide a useful meaning for the problem in the context of practical research.” (Luhmann 1993a, 206) Not every sociological operation has to use the question as an orientation point; nonetheless, the *possibility of integration* into the leading question’s horizon is essential.

Ad 2: Seyfert writes: “[...] the concept of double contingency not only describes a situation of instability und uncertainty, but also requires a certain attitude, a reflexive awareness of a looming communicative chaos and the active willingness to avoid it.” (146) To compare, the quote that Seyfert himself uses: “No action can occur without first solving this problem of double contingency, because any possibility of determination would then be lacking.” (Luhmann 1995, 103) This quote is not about “instability” or “uncertainty”, but about the “possibility of determination”. Situations of double contingency aren’t unstable; on the contrary, they are super-stable because “action cannot take place” (Luhmann 1995, 103). Consequently, Luhmann’s problem of social order isn’t about the exorcising of chaos. However, this is where Seyfert’s critique departs from. Pointedly, one could say that the problem of double contingency is about the *induction* of disorder to resolve a situation’s indeterminacy (see also Luhmann 1993b, 32).

Concerning the “active willingness to avoid [chaos]”, the following quotation by Luhmann can be added: “No preordained value consensus is needed; the problem of double contingency (i.e., empty, closed, indeterminable self-reference) draws in chance straightaway, creates sensitivity to chance, and when no value consensus exists, one can thereby invent it. The system emerges *etsi no daretur Deus*” (Luhmann 1995, 105) [1]. In double contingency, no “communicative chaos” “looms” (146); rather, sheer boredom. Luhmann’s problem of order isn’t about chaos; it is about stasis. It is also obvious that no “will to order” is presupposed here. Of course, it has to be noted that such allegations against Luhmann are quite common.

Seyfert’s critique of Luhmann depends on the correctness of the following phrase: “When systems theoreticians transport this Hobbesian fear of war into the Systems Theory framework, it emerges as the ‘*awareness of uncertainty*’”. (142) Yet in Luhmann’s theory, the emergence of social systems

[1] See also Werber 2008, 452, transl. by M. M.: “For communications to link with previous communications, not even the good will of alter and ego is needed.”

needs no intent or consensus, much less an “awareness of uncertainty”. In situations of double contingency, it is necessary to make a step *against* one’s own awareness of uncertainty. Awareness of uncertainty does not fuel the forming of social order in Luhmann’s theory. It is not especially original but, also not completely accidental that Luhmann has been confronted with the claim that his theory could not grasp the contingency of social structures: “Only an action theoretical perspective can grasp the irresolvable contingency of social order; this has to be the conclusion even after considering Systems Theory.” (Hesse 1999, 276, transl. by M. M.)

Even though this is the central misreading of Luhmann by Seyfert, which provides the foundation of his argument as a whole, it is not the only one. For example, Seyfert claims that in Systems Theory, “systems *treat* their environment *as chaos*.” (146) It is true that Luhmann stated “that the environment is always more complex than the system itself.” (Luhmann 1995, 182); but nonetheless, he distinguishes “system/environment relations from intersystem relations” (Luhmann 1995, 182), which excludes the possibility that “environment” is always synonymous of “chaos” for all systems. For Luhmann, the relation of systems to their respective environment is described best by a specified “indifference”. (Luhmann 1995, 183) This misunderstanding also affects Seyfert’s passages on the concept of interpenetration. Exemplarily, these passages also show that Seyfert is unwilling to register the differences between the sociological theories of Parsons and Luhmann. He claims that Systems Theory *generally* proceeds from the AGIL-pattern (144), which is explicitly refuted by Luhmann as too inflexible. Also, he assumes that both theories deal with “actors”, while Luhmann departs from action theory and lets social systems consist of communications.

There is also the questionable statement that in Luhmann, the “environmental influence remains purely negative” (145). Luhmann himself describes the concept of interpenetration as follows: “[...] the complexity each system makes available is an incomprehensible complexity – that is, disorder – for the receiving system. Thus one could say that psychic systems supply social systems with adequate disorder and vice versa.” (Luhmann 1995, 214) There is no “purely negative” influence to be found here. The “supply” with disorder is vital for the operability of social systems, in particular for the disruption of circular structures. The proposition that “Systems Theory is a continuous work on the awareness of contingency” (147) seems strange in light of the concept of “latency”, which describes a relation in which contingency cannot be made aware of because such an awareness would endanger the continuance of the system in question. And in claiming that “the concept

of disorder and chaos is based on a fundamental *disappointment*", (152) this certainly doesn't apply to Luhmann, who isn't disappointed by the improbability of order, but deeply amazed by the ability of socio-cultural evolution to transform the improbable into the probable. Also, Luhmann isn't that scared of chaos: "Even if everything were permitted, it wouldn't mean that everything would be possible." (Luhmann 2008, 27, transl. by M. M.)

Luhmann's notion of the improbability of the formation of social structures is by no means just a badly concealed criticism of the existing orders, as Seyfert claims (152). This allegation stands in a strange contrast to the one stated by Jürgen Habermas of Luhmann providing mere "social technology". Simply looking at Luhmann's way of describing social evolution can invalidate it. He describes it not as a progress from chaos towards order, but as the *build-up* of complexity through the *reduction* of complexity. Last but not least: The statement, "In Systems Theory, the problem of order is never applied to competing normative orders, i.e. orders that appear to one other as something other than *either* organized *or* chaotic" (143), also misses Luhmann's point. One of the reference problems of Systems Theory is the possibility of integration of functionally differentiated societies, i.e. those societies that "consist" of functional systems that are mutually intransparent but all the more dependent on each other. This critique of Luhmann simply ignores a central part of his theory.

I think a little more accuracy can be expected of an article that itself is based on the central assumption that Luhmann and Parsons had carried out "(Mis)readings of Hobbes" (148). Naturally, as all texts do, Luhmann's theory has its ambivalence and fuzziness. It can be productive to search for these ambiguities, and it is certainly not the aim of this article to claim that there is the one doctrine of Systems Theory which has to be followed rigidly. Maybe this reply can be the beginning of a constructive debate about the more recent criticism of Luhmann as exemplarily formulated in Robert Seyfert's article.

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