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Beyond Historicism: From Leibniz to Luhmann

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Abstract
The phrase 'beyond historicism' is usually associated with Bielefeld historians like Hans Ulrich Wehler and Jürgen Kocka, who attempted to turn the study of history into a social science, but a better candidate would be the sociologist Niklas Luhmann, who happened to teach as well in Bielefeld during the 1970's and 1980's. Luhmann had little affinity with the project of his colleagues from the history department. He took the opposite view that the social sciences suffered from a naive enlightenment view and should become more history minded. Like the historicists of the early nineteenth century Luhmann was indirectly inspired by the philosophy of Leibniz. Although Luhmann's theory of social systems may seem miles away from the daily interests of most historians, it can be interpreted as an *Aufhebung* of historicism. This will be demonstrated for two important concepts, the autopoietic system which incorporates the historicist notion of individuality and the concept of second order observation which can be read as an abstract redescription of what historicists meant by the historical method.

Keywords
historicism, autopoietic systems, second order observation, functionalism, individuality, historical method

Introduction

This article brings together two strands of thought that may seem incompatible at first sight, namely historicism and Niklas Luhmann's theory of social systems. By seeing these strange bedfellows in each other's light I hope to further our understanding of both of them. As for Luhmann,

many readers of his writings complain about the complex and abstract character of his theory, but my experience is that his ideas are more accessible if you approach them from a historicist perspective. With the tradition of historicist thought it is the other way round; it is not abstract enough. There is no doubt that Ranke and his successors offered important insights, but they did so in a rather unsystematic and unsatisfactory way. As a result historians were unable to discuss the general epistemological consequences of modern historical thought. For example, they did not participate in the debate on historicism that engaged many European intellectuals since Nietzsche.[1] For a more abstract view on historicism we must turn to a sociologist like Karl Mannheim or, as I would like to suggest, Niklas Luhmann.[2]

The text that follows is divided in three sections. First, I will give some historical background by linking Luhmann to Cassirer and indirectly to Leibniz, the philosophical godfather of historicist thought. Then I shall discuss how two central tenets of historicism can be reformulated in terms of Luhmann's theory. In the second section I will argue that the rather vague notion of individuality used by Meinecke can be subsumed under Luhmann's concept of autopoietic systems. In the third section I will consider the historical method as a kind of second order observation. There are other interesting similarities to be explored such as the fundamental concept of contingency, but I restrict myself to the pair just mentioned.[3] My conclusion will be that Luhmann continues some central ideas of historicism but in a new theoretical setting, so that it is appropriate to call him a theorist 'beyond historicism'.

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1) A criticism often voiced by Otto Gerhard Oexle. See for instance his *Geschichtswissenschaft im Zeichen des Historismus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996).

2) Reinhard Laube places Luhmann in the historicist tradition in his *Karl Mannheim und die Krise des Historismus: Historismus als wissenssoziologischer Perspektivismus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 61–68.

3) See for instance: Niklas Luhmann, 'Kontingenz als Eigenwert der modernen Gesellschaft', in: Idem, *Beobachtungen der Moderne* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1992), 93–129. English translation by William Whobrey: *Observations on Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

Functionalism in the tradition of Cassirer and Leibniz

In an interview shortly before his death Luhmann told about how he lived through the last years of World War II as a child soldier. When he was asked whether his choice for systems theory had anything to do with the need to overcome the chaos of those years, Luhmann denied this and explained that Cassirer's *Substance and Function* (1910) had, at that time, been for him a kind of intellectual safety net.[4] This book had deeply impressed him as a young man and been decisive for all of his later intellectual development. It can be compared to Meinecke's *Historism* (1936), in so far as both books describe the change from traditional ontological thought to our modern way of thinking. Meinecke did so in terms of the transition from natural law thinking to historicism and Cassirer in the more philosophical terms of substance and function.

Although Cassirer is usually seen as a Neo-Kantian, he was in some important respects rather a Leibnizian.[5] Following his mentor Herman Cohen, who wrote a treatise on the principle of Leibniz' infinitesimal method in 1883, Cassirer conceived the idea that the traditional Aristotelian notion of substance was replaced by the mathematical notion of the function as introduced by Leibniz.[6] A function does not refer naively to objects in our world of daily experiences but to abstract points of view from which certain relations can be ordered such as the relations between infinitesimals. Cohen and Cassirer were attracted by this mathematical metaphor, because it seemed to offer a compromise between Kantian apriorism and Aristotelian essentialism. Take the example of the infinitesimals. Apart they may have no real existence, but they allow us to figure out *quasi-apriori* the *quasi-essence* of the trajectory followed by a bullet that has been fired.

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4) Luhmann, Niklas, 'Biographie im Interview. Gespräch am 8. Januar 1996 in Oerlinghausen', in: Detlef Horster, *Niklas Luhmann* (München: Beck, 1997), 25–47.

5) Enno Rudolph, 'Substance as Function: Ernst Cassirer's Interpretation of Leibniz as Criticism of Kant' in E. Rudolph, I.-O. Stamatescu (eds.), *Philosophy, Mathematics and Modern Physics* (Berlin: Springer, 1995), 235–242. See also Detlev Pätzold, 'Cassirers leibnizianische Begriffslehre als Grundlage seiner kulturhistorischen Symboltheorie', *Dialektik* (1995/1), 97–108.

6) Gregory B. Moynahan, 'Hermann Cohen's Das Prinzip der Infinitesimalmethode, Ernst Cassirer, and the Politics of Science in Wilhelmine Germany', *Perspectives on Science*, 11 (2003), 35–75.

Cassirer's influence on Luhmann is perceptible on at least two closely connected points, the idea of the dynamic stability of systems and, next, in that of functionalism. A serious obstacle to an adequate understanding of modern systems theory is the idea that a system is a kind of thing. We should rather think of it as an integration of temporary and transitory events into a dynamic but stable whole. That is at least what Cassirer and Luhmann had in mind.[7] The reified image of a system as a solid substance goes back to traditional ontology. According to the Aristotelian tradition everything has a substance or essence that can be discovered by abstracting from all accidentals. In this way one arrives at 'abstract' species and genera. As a matter of fact, the method is rather arbitrary. For how do we know what is 'essential' and what is not? Cherries and meat both have the attributes red, juicy and edible, so what is then essential to each of them? Cassirer shows how the concept of substance became obsolete by the development of early-modern science. Especially the infinitesimal calculus called for a new approach and Leibniz' concept of 'function' met this requirement. Cassirer tries to explain this by distinguishing two kinds of abstraction.

The traditional way of abstraction, which was characteristic of the Aristotelian tradition and modern movements like empiricism, is called the negative way by Cassirer.[8] The idea is that particular substances like gold, silver and copper can be stripped of their accidental properties until only the general substance 'metal' is left. It has the disadvantage that the process is irreversible. We cannot go back from the general to the specific. Positive abstraction on the other hand is able to do this, provided that we trade in the concept of the substance for that of the function. A function defines a relation between variables which can be substituted for a range of values. Take for instance the colour spectrum. We can replace 'golden', 'silvery', and 'coppery' by certain optic variables and combine these with others in a formula. The advantage is then that we can always reread the formula from the abstract to the concrete, from metal to gold, because it encapsulates all the relevant instances. Cassirer took the infinitesimal calculus and

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7) Ingo Rill, *Symbolische Identität. Dynamik und Stabilität bei Ernst Cassirer und Niklas Luhmann* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1995).

8) Ernst Cassirer, *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff. Untersuchungen über die Gundfragen der Erkenntniskritik* (1910) in Idem, *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 6 (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2000), 20 sqq.

more particularly integration as a paradigm for other cases. In this he followed Leibniz himself, who suggested that the monad is regulated by a function-like concept, which covers the whole series of perceptions and their mutual relations and which he called the 'predicate in notion' principle.

Luhmann stuck to Cassirer's functionalism in all of his work and distinguished it explicitly from the functionalism that was adopted by most social scientists in the twentieth century, that is to say the organicistic and teleological idea that parts have functions for a whole.[9] This so-called structural functionalism is still tributary to the traditional ontology of parts and wholes and focuses primarily on questions of integration and conservation. Luhmann's functionalism is of a totally other kind. It resembles the historian's way of comparing and relating divergent phenomena from a certain point of view as described by Ankersmit.[10] The narrative 'scope' which allows historians to lump together the most diverse things has its literary counterpart in Kenneth Burke's 'perspective by incongruity', a term often used by Luhmann.[11] I will not go deeper into this matter here and restrict myself to the observation that Luhmann himself saw a close relationship with the historical method: 'Historicism and functionalism originated simultaneously and are closely connected'. He added however that functionalism could make historicism less arbitrary than it presently is, because the former has a sound support in systems theory. Luhmann was of the opinion that 'The problems occasioned by theoretical reflection on the historicism and functionalism of social discourse is still unsolved after 200 years'.[12] He considered it his task to correct this as he made clear in his inaugural lecture *Social Enlightenment* of 1967.[13] The text of this programmatic statement reads like a historicist indictment of the Enlightenment from the early nineteenth century. Luhmann criticised the ahis-

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[9] See Niklas Luhmann, 'Funktion und Kausalität' (1962) and 'Funktionale Methode und Systemtheorie' (1964) in: Idem, *Soziologische Aufklärung* 1 (Cologne-Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag 1970; 7th ed. 2005), 11–39, 39–68.

[10] F.R. Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic. A semantic analysis of the historian's language* (The Hague-Boston-London: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1983), 220–225.

[11] See for instance 'Soziologische Aufklärung' (1967) in: Idem, *Soziologische Aufklärung* 1 (Cologne-Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag 1970; 7th ed. 2005), 83–116, esp. 85–87.

[12] Niklas Luhmann, *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik: Studien zur Wissenssoziologie der modernen Gesellschaft.* Vol. 1 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980; second ed. 1993), 9–10.

[13] See note 11.

torical and even anti-historical stance of his fellow sociologists and called for a clarification of the Enlightenment (*Abklärung der Aufklärung*). It need not surprise that he soon collided with Habermas, the self-declared champion of the Enlightenment in Germany.

Individuality and Autopoietic Systems

The idea of individuality is often mentioned as a typical feature of historicism, especially by Meinecke who relates it, among others, to Leibniz' monadic philosophy. It is a rather vague idea actually and one of the reasons is that it does not only refer to human individuals but to social wholes as well. Ranke wrote for example about the individual personality of states in 'A Dialogue on Politics' (1836). And Otto Gierke, to give another example from the legal sphere, went so far as to attribute a real personality to corporations.[14] The 'individualizing approach' mentioned by Meinecke has in other words a strong holistic bias. This elicited much criticism from the side of empiricists who defended an older, eighteenth century kind of individualism. These 'methodological individualists' came with a good and a bad argument. The good argument is that holism is morally unacceptable, because it subordinates individual human beings to the higher purposes of class, race or nation. The bad argument is that all social wholes can and must be reduced to acts of individuals. This is a simplistic kind of empiricism, which leaves the sociologist or historian studying the complexities of modern society with empty hands. How should we explain to a Martian what earthlings do with a cash dispenser? Without using notions like bank or money system it would be an impossible task.[15]

The question seems to be how we can retain holism without the moral problems typically occasioned by it. The answer provided by Luhmann is surprisingly simple and effective. If we can accept the idea that social systems do not consist of human individuals but of human communications, the problem is solved. We can be holistic as much as we want without any fear of totalitarianism. Admittedly, it is not so easy to give up the idea that

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[14] See a.o. Maitland's introduction in Otto Friedrich von Gierke, *Political Theories of the Middle Age*, transl. and introd. by Frederic William Maitland (Boston; Beacon Press, 1958), vii–xlvii.

[15] M. Mandelbaum, 'Societal Facts', in P. Gardiner ed., *Theories of History* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1959), 476–488.

society consists of human individuals. After all, most of us are still committed to the traditional ontology of wholes and parts and to the humanistic inclination to place man in the centre of all things. Against this background it is hard to accept Luhmann's clear-cut distinction between individual consciousness systems and social communication systems. Within the scope of this paper I cannot explain in a satisfactory way how Luhmann comes to this distinction, but a crucial point worth mentioning is that both kinds of systems can only process their own operations by themselves.

Although individual and social systems are closely related, they cannot take each other's role. As a matter of fact communication systems cannot think and psychic systems cannot communicate, in the sense of acting in the outside world. The operational closure of both kinds of systems explains at the same time why they need each other. Just because our brains are black boxes we are dependent on communication, and just because social systems cannot think they depend on our experiences for the content of their communication processes. In this respect the systems are equal. A big difference for the sociologist and the historian is, however, that only communication is empirically observable. What goes on in the mind of billions of people is hidden from their view. It would therefore be preposterous to say that 'man' is the sociological or historical object of study. We cannot seriously maintain that our knowledge of society in past or present depends on our knowledge of individual human beings.

The idea that society is a kind of container of human individuals belongs to the ontology of pre-modern societies according to Luhmann.[16] The traditional definition of a system as a whole composed of ready made parts is derived from this ontology. It is the definition of a machine, but that is actually how a world made by a creator or demiurge was conceived.[17] Human creatures were considered to be the ready made parts of society, elements that could not be divided and were therefore called in-dividuals. This traditional systems theory of wholes and parts has become outdated since Bertalanffy and other biologists developed the modern systems theo-

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16) For a general introduction in Luhmann's system theory see: Niklas Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme: Grundriß einer allgemeinen Theorie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984). Engl. transl.: *Social Systems* (Stanford 1995).

17) Ernst Topitsch, *Vom Ursprung und Ende der Metaphysik* (Münich: DTV, 1972).

ry.[18] This last theory is based on the distinction between system and environment, under influence of the laws of thermodynamics and the theory of evolution. A popular representation is the input-output model of an open system that is in interaction with its environment.

Other (neuro-)biologists, particularly Maturana and Varela came with the concept of an operationally closed system.[19] They did not fundamentally question the idea of an open system exchanging material with its environment, but added the proviso that an organism can only operate within a closed network of corresponding operations. For instance, a body can only produce cells in an already existing network of cells, a brain can only process neuronal stimuli in a closed neuronal circuit and a consciousness can only process its own thoughts. In normal circumstances there is no question of direct causation from the outside, because the (sub-)system decides by itself how it responds to 'perturbations' coming from the environment. An important consequence of the theory of Maturana and Varela is that systems can no longer be considered in a linear way, as an assemblage of existing parts. This view only applies to allopoietic or men-made machines and is found wanting for autopoietic machines which (re-) produce their own parts. Here we must take a circular view of parts and wholes constituting each other. This is the essence of the concept of autopoiesis as Maturana and Varela developed it for living organisms. It is typical of his theoretical perspicacity and audacity that Luhmann immediately seized on the autopoiesis concept to develop his own idea of autonomous individual and social meaning systems. His main argument was that these systems also (re-) produce their own elements in the form of thoughts or communications. This import of biological concepts into sociology raised some questions, but the laconic answer of Luhmann was that there is nothing wrong with borrowing ideas from other fields of knowledge as long as they are abstract enough.

Autopoietic systems have some general features that remind of Leibniz' monads. In the first place they are self-referential in the sense that whole and parts are involved in a circular process. This means that individual

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[18] Ludwig von Bertalanffy, *General Systems Theory. Foundations, Development, Applications* (New York: George Braziller Inc, 1969).

[19] F. Varela, H. Maturana and R. Uribe, 'Autopoiesis: The organization of living systems, its characterization and a model', *Biosystems* 5 (1974), 187–196. See further H. Maturana and F. Varela *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The realization of the living* (Boston: D. Reidel, 1980).

operations like thoughts, communications or perceptions are part of a recursive network. They exist only by virtue of their references to other similar operations of the system, in a way that could be described with Husserl's terminology of retention and protention. Like the infinitesimals in the calculus the elements of monadic and autopoietic systems make only sense in relation to each other. This guarantees the continuation of the process in which parts and whole constitute each other. For standard logic this circularity is hard to accept. Take the problem of self-description. Logic would have it that there already is a 'self' before one can start to describe it, but in reality individual and social 'selves' often are the very result of self-description, which is by all means a 'strange loop'.[20] Historians are well aware of this after the linguistic and cultural turn of the late twentieth century. The concept of a narrative identity is common knowledge by now. By writing a national history we contribute for instance to the 'imagined community' that a nation is.

A second characteristic of autopoietic systems is that they are essentially historical, which means that they can be understood only in terms of their own history. As Leibniz' monad each system is a unique outcome of myriads of choices and events. Choices made early in the process have consequences for what follows and create a so-called path-dependency. This is not to say that these consequences are predictable. In spite of the fact that autopoietic systems are structurally determined, their behaviour is unpredictable because of their internal complexity. Foerster called these systems 'non-trivial', meaning that their output cannot be simply computed from their input.[21] Since we know more about nonlinear dynamic systems the traditional philosophical opposition between determinism and freedom has lost much of its former sharpness. Another traditional problem, that of system integration, has also lost its urgency. Where Leibniz had to fall back on a 'harmonie preetablie' to account for the cohesion of all monads, we can simply appeal to the theory of evolution, not only in the natural world but in the social-cultural world as well.

Because Luhmann detaches social systems from individual human beings in the way explained above, he is able to develop a theory of social evolution in the true sense of the word. As long as the concept of society is

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20) Douglas Hofstadter, *I am a Strange Loop* (New York: Basic Books, 2007).

21) Heinz von Foerster, *Understanding Understanding – Essays on Cybernetics and Cognition.* (New York: Springer Verlag, 2002).

dependent on individual human beings, it is impossible to give real meaning to such a theory. The evolution of the human species does not tell us much about what happened in the last 10.000 years. While our genes hardly changed in that period, society underwent the most amazing metamorphoses. This calls for a theory that explains the internal dynamics of society. A large part of Luhmann's theory is devoted to doing just this. It must be added that explanation does not mean causal explanation here. Luhmann restricts himself to describing great structural changes with the help of the Darwinian mechanism of variation, selection and retention. His departing point is the internal differentiation of society, which presents us with three great principles up to now, namely the segmentary differentiation of tribal societies, the hierarchical differentiation of stratified societies and the functional differentiation of modern society. These different types have their counterparts in three different periods in the history of communication, namely 1) oral tradition, 2) writing, and 3) printing.

Luhmann gives only a rough sketch of the social evolution, not having the pretension of superseding historical writing.[22] He explains for instance why the printing press was a great revolution in communication, but leaves it to historians to explain in a more causal way why this revolution took place in Europe and not in China. So, there is no need to quarrel about competences here. Luhmann does not step into the historian's shoes, and historians do not have to be afraid that their work is reduced to filling in the mere details of Luhmann's supertheory. The theory is very open, partly because contingency is at the heart of the evolutionary process. It provides a good platform for questions to be asked and for fruitful discussion. Important is moreover that Luhmann offers something what historians badly need, namely a good account of the complexities of modern society. That alone is sufficient reason for consulting his work.

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[22] Niklas Luhmann, 'Evolution und Geschichte', in: Idem, *Soziologische Aufklärung*, 2: Aufsätze zur Theorie der Gesellschaft (5th ed. Wiesbaden 2005), 187–212; Niklas Luhmann, 'Geschichte als Prozeß und die Theorie sozio-kultureller Evolution' in: Idem, *Soziologische Aufklärung*, 3: Soziales System (Wiesbaden 2005), 205–228.

Historical Method and Second Order Observation

The third section of my paper has a more methodological character. It starts with the widespread opinion that the study of history is an empirical discipline. Marc Bloch for instance has a chapter on 'historical observation' in his well-known *The Historian's Craft*.[23] Although he admits that we cannot observe the past itself, Bloch does not see a real problem here. Relying upon a distinction between direct and indirect approaches of reality he argues that the study of history does not essentially differ from other social disciplines. In all cases researchers simply have to interpret empirical evidence. I will not discuss Bloch here, but I think he is wide off the mark. The study of history certainly has its own specific problems and the early historicists intuitively felt it. Without using these words Ranke and his contemporaries made in fact a distinction between first order and second order observation, which is something altogether different from Bloch's distinction between direct and indirect observation. It is a complete new paradigm in the study of history.

In order to explain it we must focus on the 'decision' that the historian should rely on written sources only. This decision, if we may call it so, was taken somewhere between 1750 and 1850. In 1759 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing could still state as a truism that a historian should only write about his own time and his own country, because he can only trust his own observations.[24] It was a view that went back to Herodotus's idea of 'autopsy' and became canonised around 600 AD by Isidor of Seville with the words *videre et interesse*.[25] For Lessing and his contemporaries it still was a self-evident truth, but the critical comments on Lessing's statement made during the first half of the nineteenth century suggest that opinion changed

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23) Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, Tr. Peter Putnam (New York: Vintage Book, 1953), Ch. 2: 'Historical Observation'.

24) Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend*, Dritter Teil, VIII 23 August 1759: ‚Überhaupt aber glaube ich, daß der Name eines wahren Geschichtschreibers nur demjenigen zukömmt, der die Geschichte seiner Zeiten und seines Landes beschreibet. Denn nur der kann selbst als Zeuge auftreten'.

25) Isidor of Seville, *Etymologiae*. Liber I: *De Grammatica*, XLI 'De historia': 'Apud veteres enim nemo conscribebat historiam, nisi is qui interfuisset, et ea quae conscribenda essent vidisset'. ('Among the Ancients nobody wrote history, unless he had witnessed and seen by himself what had to be described'.)

diametrically in that period.[26] The big new idea was that the historian should refrain from describing his own observations and use only written sources. Put differently, the historian became an observer of observations that had been made by other people in the past; or, more succinctly, he became a second-order observer.

The distinction between first and second order observation resembles to a certain extent the usual distinction between subjectivity and objectivity, but is more revealing about historical method than the latter. By the exclusive use of written sources the historicists hoped to be better able to reconstruct the past. By comparing different accounts of a certain event personal idiosyncrasies might be eliminated and so objective truth about what had really happened could be established. So far so good. But what if the available historical evidence happen to share the same prejudices or the same cultural bias? In that case the elimination of subjectivity on a personal basis will not do. The historian can then only try to reconstruct the ideational reality of his historical informants with the help of vague notions like Zeitgeist, culture, ideology, world view, mentality, episteme, and paradigm. This he can only do by contrasting them with his own Zeitgeist, culture, and etcetera. But how to get hold of our own Zeitgeist? That seems to require a Münchhausen trick. It follows that no clear distinction can be made between how people thought in the past and how we think today. If there is such a problem as that of the objectivity of historical writing, this is how we should conceive of it. It is, in fact, a problem of second order observation.

Luhmann's distinction between first and second order observation can be of further help for explaining historical method. Luhmann had adopted it from a research tradition describing itself as 'second order cybernetics' led by Heinz von Foerster, a pioneer of the early cybernetics movement together with Wiener, Neumann, McCullough, Bateson and others. Foerster led a famous biological computer laboratory in Illinois from 1958 to 1975 and described the researchers there as 'living systems observing other living systems'.[27] To tackle the circularity of second order cybernetics

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[26] Fritz Ernst, 'Zeitgeschehen und Geschichtschreibung. Eine Skizze', *Die Welt als Geschichte. Zeitschrift für universalgeschichtliche Forschung*, 17 (1957), 137–189.

[27] For a short history see Albert Müller, 'Eine kurze Geschichte des BCL. Heinz von Foerster und das Biological Computer Laboratory', *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften*, 11 (2000), 9–30.

Foerster and others had appealed to a curious calculus, developed by the British engineer and mathematician George Spencer Brown.[28] Luhmann interpreted this calculus as a theory of observation and assigned to it a central place in the architecture of his theory. Because of its abstract character his interpretation can be applied to all kinds of systems.

I can only give a rough outline of Luhmann's theory of observation. Point of departure is the claim that in observation always two things go together, namely distinction and indication. The distinction cuts the field of observation into two, whereas indication requires us to focus on one part while excluding the other. That is the main idea. For example, if I observe a vase, I divide the room in which the vase finds itself into a foreground and background and, next, focus my attention on the object on the foreground, that is, the vase. We need a contrast in order to see something at all. For example, if the room is dark I cannot discern the vase at all. Since the distinction between figure and ground is made unconsciously most of the time, our observations can be said to be asymmetrical. We notice the vase, but not the surrounding. And yet, the vase would not be there without an environment, against which it stands out. This definition of observation is not only applicable to sensory perception, but to conceptual thought as well. It is so abstract that it can be even used for social systems or electronic sensors. For Luhmann the distinction between system and environment was paradigmatic. If we take this distinction as our departing point, we can get a more precise view of his observation theory.

The asymmetry of observation mentioned just now announces itself already when a system observes its own environment, because it will see only one side of a distinction, the other side of which is the system itself. This is the basic position of first order observation, in which we are unable to observe the distinction enabling us to observe at all, namely the distinction between ourselves and the environment. Surely, we are well aware that there is such a distinction, but we cannot actually *see* it. The distinction that guides our observation cannot at the same time be an object of our observation. *It is our blind spot.* Although it is part of the *condition humaine* to be first order observers, we can sometimes claim to be second order observers, namely when we are able to discern the distinction between an

28) George Spencer Brown, *The Laws of Form* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969).

observer and his environment. Second order observation comes naturally in the case of the presence of another self apart from our own self. For example, when we notice that another observer is not able to see what we see ('watch out behind you!'). This may seem trivial, but an important implication is that the world does not look the same to everyone. Each observing system has its own viewpoint or perspective. In other words, second order observation contradicts the illusion that the world is as we see it; and can in this way be said to be the common ground of all current denunciations of egocentrism, geocentrism, ethnocentrism, hodiecentrism and other forms of centric thought. It shows that all thought is contingent and relative to a point of view.

Although second order observation is as old as humanity, it became only a prominent cultural form in the modern time. Luhmann explains this by the transformation of the traditional hierarchical society into the modern functionally differentiated society. In traditional society authorities claimed the absolute truth for their cosmology. This was an imposed first order observation so to say. People with heterodox ideas were prosecuted as heretics. Admittedly, there was a rudimentary sort of second order observation in the form of what one took to be God's perspective. By assuming, or identifying themselves with that perspective people could have a second order look at themselves; though, of course, it was a perspective imposed by the church. When society lost its hierarchical organisation and became a polycentric whole of functional subsystems, the observation of other observers became a social necessity. Intercultural contacts between Europeans and the native peoples of other continents also played an important role here. It occasioned the birth of what was later to be called cultural anthropology. This is, so to say, a *spatial* implementation of second order observing. There is also a *temporal* one, called cultural history. But the latter variant of second order observation is in need of more clarification.

This brings me to another possibility of how second order observation may involve the ego, namely as a form of self-observation. It is important to insist that this kind of observation is necessarily historical, because we can only observe our own way of observing by means of our memory and after a certain amount of time has elapsed since the moment of first order observation. The guiding difference of our observations on the level of first order observation only becomes visible when we have exchanged it

for a new guiding difference on the level of second order observation. In history this may take many years. Think, for example, of the historiography on the French Revolution. French historians remained under the spell of the revolutionary distinction between political left and right for centuries. Only at the time of the 200th anniversary they were ready to drop it and to look at the revolution with other eyes, as was argued by François Furet in his *Penser la Révolution Française* of 1978. In our own life we can have the same experience, for example when suddenly realizing ourselves that we have become another person than we were before. The nostalgic experience of our personal past exemplifies all this.

The American sociologist Fred Davis explains nostalgia in terms of figure and ground, which corresponds with the observation theory just explained.[29] His hypothesis is that young people are so much focused on the exciting events in their life that they see a lot of other things only out of the corners of their eyes. These background observations are stored in the latent or implicit memory but can suddenly appear on the foreground in later life. Simple objects from one's youth like farm attributes, jukeboxes, Coke bottles, Vespa scooters or the first PC may then get an aura and become collector's items in this way. Nostalgia is often triggered by a trivial detail like Proust's Madeleine cake and it has a bitter-sweet taste, because it confronts us in a very direct way with our lost youth. Nostalgia may have become a commercial topic nowadays, but in the seventeenth century homesick Swiss mercenaries already suffered from it and it was then even considered a serious mental illness. So there is no reason to doubt the authenticity of the feeling nor that nostalgia truly involves a quite real sentiment of detachment and loss.

Nostalgia is a first step to historical second order observation, as the Romanticist's *Sehnsucht* for the Middle Ages showed. It enables us to switch from manifest memories to latent ones and shows us thus the asymmetric character of our former observations. Behind the events which we clearly remember looms a background of vague moods and experiences that we were not aware of before. This background is important because it is this 'other half of our world view', as discussed a moment ago. Important

[29] Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday. A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York: Free Press, 1979). See also F. R. Ankersmit, *History and Tropology. The Rise and Fall of Metaphor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 196–208.

clues for the Zeitgeist, or style of a period can be found in it. Nostalgia, however, is not yet second order observation or historical consciousness itself, because this switch from figure to ground does not yet call into question the distinction between both sides. We can for example switch from Enlightenment to Romanticism, but that does not mean that we are able to explain what the unity of their difference is. What are these cultural periods together? Modern culture? This question could probably be answered only from a post-modern point of view.

Conclusion

My conclusion is that Luhmann's theory can be seen as an *Aufhebung* of historicism, in the triple sense of cancellation, preservation, and elevation. By elevation I mean that historicism is lifted to a higher level of abstraction. On that higher level two basic tenets of historicism are preserved, namely the notion of individuality and of historical method. Both of them are incorporated in autopoiesis and second order observation. The cancellation is more difficult to explain, because I am not sure what the consequences will be for historians. I am convinced that Luhmann's theory supersedes historicism, but does this mean that historians should become sociologists? Historicism had, after all, also the function of legitimising the autonomy of the historical discipline. Will this change now, and do historians run the risk of losing their independence from the social sciences? If it is up to Luhmann, there is no reason to be afraid. A crucial difference in his eyes is that historians are storytellers and sociologists are not. But this would be the subject for another paper. So I must end with a cliff-hanger.