

Preface

On my appointment to the Department of Sociology established at the University of Bielefeld in 1969, I was asked what research projects I had running. My project was, and ever since has been, the theory of society; term: thirty years; costs: none. As far as the time frame was concerned, my estimation of the difficulties was realistic. At that time, the literature in sociology gave little cause to consider such a project possible at all, not least because neo-Marxist precepts blocked any ambition of producing a theory of society. My discussion with Jürgen Habermas was published shortly afterward under the title *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie—Was leistet die Systemforschung?* (Theory of Society or Social Technology: What Does Systems Research Accomplish?) [Frankfurt, 1971]. The irony of the title was that neither author wished to stand up for social technology, but we differed on what a theory of society ought to be; and it is symptomatic that the theory of society first came to public attention in the form, not of a theory, but of a controversy.

My initial plan had been to publish the theory of society in three parts: an introductory chapter on systems theory, a treatment of the societal system, and a third part dealing with the most important functional systems of society. The basic concept has remained, but I have had to correct my ideas about the size of the undertaking more than once. In 1984, I brought out the “introductory chapter” in book form under the title *Soziale Systeme: Grundriß einer allgemeinen Theorie* (Social Systems: Outline of a General Theory).¹ In essence, my aim was to apply the concept of self-referential operation to the theory of social systems. This aim has not fundamentally changed, although progress in general systems theory and epistemological constructivism has repeatedly offered opportunities to extend it. Some contributions have been published in collections of essays under the title *Soziologische Aufklärung* (Sociological Enlightenment). Other material is available only in manuscript form or has fed into this book.

Since the early 1980s, it has become increasingly clear how important the *comparability* of functional systems is for the theory of society. This had already been a basic consideration in Talcott Parsons's theory construction. The theoretical importance of comparability is even greater if we concede that society cannot be deduced from a principle or a basic norm, be it the customary justice, solidarity, or reasoned consensus. For even those who do not recognize or who violate such principles contribute to societal operations, and society itself must take account of this possibility. On the other hand, it is not by chance that widely differing functional areas such as science and law, economics and politics, the mass media, and intimate relations can be shown to have comparable structures—not least because their differentiation requires systems to be formed. But can this be shown? Parsons attempted to guarantee it through the analytic of the action concept. If the thought is not convincingly elaborated, we can do no more than formulate theories for individual functional systems and test whether, despite all differences between fields, we can work with the same conceptual apparatus—including autopoiesis and operational closure, first- and second-order observation, self-description, medium and form, coding and, in orthogonal relation thereto, the distinction between self-reference and other-reference as internal structure.

As a result, I gave priority to theories for individual functional systems. The following have already been published: *Die Wirtschaft der Gesellschaft* (The Economy as a Social System) (1988), *Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft* (Science as a Social System) (1990), *Das Recht der Gesellschaft* (Law as a Social System) (1993),² and *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft* (Art as a Social System) (1995).³ Further texts of this type are to follow. Meanwhile, however, work on the theory of the societal system had also progressed. I had produced several thousand pages of manuscript, partly to accompany lectures, without having put the material in publishable form. My then secretary retired and the position was frozen for many months. In this situation, the University in Lecce offered me an opportunity to work. So I fled to Italy with the project and the manuscripts. There I wrote a short version of the theory of society, which, translated into Italian, revised several times and adapted for use at an Italian university, has since been published.⁴ The manuscript then produced became the basis for a more extensive German edition, on which, once again provided with a secretary, I was able to work in Bielefeld. The present text is the result of this eventful history.

The system under consideration is that of society itself, as opposed to all social systems that develop within society in the performance of societal operations: the functional systems of society, as well as interaction systems, organizational systems, and social movements, all of which presuppose that a system of society has already been constituted. The key issue is therefore what operation produces and reproduces this system whenever it occurs. The answer, discussed in Chapter 2, is communication. It is a circular relationship: society cannot be conceived of without communication, nor can communication be conceived of without society. Questions of genesis and morphogenesis cannot be answered by any hypothesis of origin and are obscured rather than resolved by the thesis that “the human being” is genuinely social in nature. Chapter 3 entrusts these questions to an appropriate evolution theory.

The thesis of self-production by communication postulates clear boundaries between system and environment. The reproduction of communications from communications takes place in society. All further physical, chemical, organic, neurophysiological, and mental conditions are environmental conditions. Society can substitute for them within the limits of its own operational capabilities. No human being is indispensable to society. This naturally does not mean that communication is possible without consciousness, without brains well supplied with blood, without life, without a moderate climate.

All systems formed in society depend in turn on communication; otherwise we would not be able to say that they take place in society. It also means that system formations within society cannot connect with any section of the environment. This is true for segmentary differentiation and even more so, across all intermediate stages, for functional differentiation. In the environment of the societal system there are no families, no nobility, no politics, no economy.

The assumption of reflexive self-reference is built into the concept of communication. Communication always communicates that it communicates. It might correct itself in retrospect or deny that it had meant what it appeared to mean. It can be interpreted by means of communication on a scale from credible to incredible. But it is always accompanied by memory, even though it might be only short-term, which practically excludes any assertion that it has not taken place at all. Retrospectively, norms and excuses, tact requirements and counterfactual disregard arise,

with which communication detoxifies itself in the event of the occasional malfunction.

This is probably why all societies appear to ensure that communication can relate to the societal system as the framework condition of its own possibility, as the unity of the coherence of communications that is always connoted. Like Parsons, many have inferred the need for basic consensus, shared values, or unthematic, “life-world” concord. I make do with the slimmed-down concept of self-description, which also allows for the existence of fundamental dissension, and that this dissension is communicated about.

With the concept of a system that describes itself and contains its own descriptions, we venture into logically intractable terrain. A society that describes itself does so internally, but as it were from outside. It observes itself as an object of its own knowledge, but in performing its operations, it cannot itself feed the observation into the object, because this would change this object and require further observation. Whether it observes itself from within or without is a question that society has to leave open. If it also attempts to say so, it opts for a paradoxical identity. The solution sociology found has been styled the “critique” of society. Effectively, this amounts to constantly renewed description of descriptions, the constant introduction of new metaphors or reuse of old metaphors, and thus of “redescriptions” in Mary Hesse’s sense.⁵ This can very well bring new insights, even though methodologically steeled investigators would not accept them as “explanations.”

This text is itself an attempt at communication. It seeks to provide a description of society in full knowledge of the predicament outlined. If the communication of a theory of society succeeds as communication, it changes the description of its object and thus the object receiving this description. To keep this in sight from the outset, the book was titled *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (The Society of Society).