

**EÖTVÖS LORÁND UNIVERSITY  
FACULTY OF ARTS**

**DOCTORAL THESES**

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**The Structure of Niklas Luhmann's Theory of Society and its  
Relevance for Political Science and Political Philosophy**

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## **1. The aim of the dissertation**

The aim of my dissertation is to study Niklas Luhmann's social theory from the point of view of political science and political philosophy. This means the analysis of how Luhmann's findings on politics come from his more general statements; how he reformulates the key concepts of political science; and how we can position his theory by means of some important topics of social and political philosophy. To study these questions it is inevitable to expound the structure of Luhmann's theory, its most important concepts and statements, the connections between them, and the efforts that led him in these theoretical decisions. So the dissertation has two aims: first I am going to present the structure of Luhmann's theory then I am going to discuss its political scientific and political philosophical aspects.

In my opinion there are two reasons why it is important to analyse Luhmann's theory from the point of view of political science and political philosophy. On the one hand, politics plays an important role in Luhmann's whole theory, on the other hand, Luhmann's thoughts can be significant when discussing the topics of political science and political philosophy. The importance of politics in Luhmann's theory arises from the fact that this is the subsystem of the society by means of which we can chiefly influence the functioning of the society. Therefore we will sooner or later come to politics while studying most of the social issues. Furthermore in my dissertation I endeavour to point out that the analysis of the relationship between Luhmann's theory and politics can in some respect shed new light on his whole theory. The importance of Luhmann's thoughts for political science and political philosophy come from the fact that Luhmann analyses the main topics of these disciplines in a framework of an extraordinarily all-embracing and complex theory; and studying the political phenomena in such a new and wide context – even if we do not accept Luhmann's statements – by all means can provide new knowledge.

## **2. The structure of the dissertation and the methods applied**

The double aim makes the study divide in two main parts. In chapters 2-6 I present the general characteristics of the theory, while in chapters 7-9 I discuss Luhmann's findings on politics. At the end I summarize the results of my study in chapter 10.

I start the presentation of Luhmann's theory with a general overview (chapter 2) to present some of its important features before the detailed, step by step discussion of the theory. This overview is necessary to get a preliminary picture of Luhmann's whole theory,

which makes it easier to understand the inside connections in his theory and his theoretical decisions. Then the theory's presentation follows, which goes from the most abstract level to the more concrete ones. I discuss theory of difference and general systems theory in chapter 3, its application to the social phenomena that is theory of social systems in chapter 4, and then one type of social systems, namely society in chapter 5. At the end in chapter 5 I make an attempt to show the circular structure of Luhmann's theory, i.e. to demonstrate why the difference-theoretical starting point is the consequence of the theory construction requirements, which derive from the characteristics of modern society described by Luhmann.

The second part, in which I discuss Luhmann's view on politics, begins with the study of how Luhmann characterises politics as one of the functional subsystems of society, and how he reformulates the key concepts of political science, like state, legitimacy, democracy, public opinion and welfare state on the grounds of his theoretical considerations (chapter 7). The reason why I have chosen these five concepts is that Luhmann has a considerably characteristic view on them very different from the political science mainstream. Furthermore these concepts demonstrate well the theoretical efforts outlined in the general presentation of Luhmann's theory. Then I discuss Luhmann's theory in the light of four social or political philosophical questions (chapter 8). These are: the epistemological and science philosophical debate between realism and constructivism; the question of methodological individualism and collectivism; the discourse of universal human rights versus cultural relativism; and the relationship of Luhmann's theory to the main ideologies. These four questions constitute the core of debates in social and political philosophy, so they provide excellent tools to position the theory. Furthermore these points help to shed light on the unique position of Luhmann's theory among social theories, because – as we will see several times - Luhmann cannot be classified in any of the opposing camps, or he provides novel and considerable conceptual and theoretical solutions for reformulating and superseding these social theoretical questions. Finally the critiques of Luhmann's theory follows. First I present and group the critiques most frequently arising against him, then I present two own objections regarding Luhmann's findings on politics.

From the methodological point of view it is necessary to touch the question of textual and contextual analyses. Both of them play a role in my study. In the first part I present Luhmann's general theory in a textual analysis. One could also argue in favour of the contextual method, since Luhmann's theory contacts with some important theoretical streams, among which systems theory is the most important. Thus we could start with the analysis of how Luhmann's theory connects to former systems theoretical approaches or how he

modified them. In this case we should emphasize his relationship to Talcott Parsons' theory. I do not consider this approach to be effective because of the following reasons. On the one hand Luhmann has so radically reinterpreted the systems theoretical concepts and statements that analysing the former theories would not provide many points of reference, on the contrary, it could be misleading. On the other hand, Luhmann's systems theoretical conceptions – at least in the very end of his lifework – were not starting-points, but subcategories of a more general theory, namely the theory of difference. I think the best way to understand Luhmann's theory is to concentrate mainly on the connections between its components, that is on the inside coherence of the theory. Of course it will be sometimes unavoidable to refer to the context because Luhmann takes some concepts from other theories or he often refers to theoretical debates with a long tradition. In the second part – which is about politics – the contextual analysis gets a bigger role, but only to a restricted degree during the discussion of Luhmann's reinterpretation of the key political concepts. In the framework of this study I did not consider it as solvable to sketch the various theories of state, legitimacy or democracy, or the conceptions on public opinion or welfare state. Regarding these questions we can rather find several differing and partly overlapping opinions than two or some crystallized poles, so these contexts can hardly serve as point of reference to analyse Luhmann's theory. Nonetheless we can not avoid either to refer to the context during these analyses since Luhmann expounds his own findings usually in opposition to other approaches which he thinks to be generally accepted. However, we can speak of a real contextual analysis in case of exploring the four social- and political philosophical questions mentioned above. Regarding these questions – as opposed to the political concepts mentioned – we can find two, or in case of the ideologies three, clear viewpoints that can well serve as orienting points to position Luhmann's theory.

### **3. Findings of my dissertation**

In the first part of my study I expounded the structure of Luhmann's theory, its main concepts and findings.

- I started the analysis with discussing some specific characters of the whole theory. Luhmann's aim is to elaborate the theory of society. In his view, however, theory of society and epistemology suppose each other, so Luhmann's aim is to form a theory that describes society but at the same time reflects on the connection between society and

cognition, the latter being part of the former. The result of this is that Luhmann's theory has a circular structure and it doesn't have any basis or starting point. With this Luhmann refuses the interpretations of the relationship of philosophy and sociology in which philosophy serves as ground for sociological research.

- We can distinguish four abstraction levels in Luhmann's theory. On the top, on the most abstract level we can find difference theory, which is based on George Spencer Brown's theory. General systems theory is one of the possible forms of difference theory. In Luhmann general systems theory means the theory of autopoietic systems, a concept originating from two neurobiologists, Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela. The next level is the sociological application of general systems theory, that is the theory of social systems. Social systems can be further divided into society, organisation, interaction and protest movements. I reconstructed Luhmann's theory going down from the most abstract level.
- According to the theory of difference, difference is prior to identity, because to indicate something, it has to be first distinguished from everything else. Every observation on the world starts with a distinction. Accordingly systems theory is observing the world by means of the system/environment distinction. System is the unity of this distinction. The operationalist approach also decisively influences Luhmann's theory, that is Luhmann wants to build up every social and psychological phenomenon from operations having no duration. The building block of Luhmann's theory is observation as operation, applying the notion of observation not only to psychological but to social systems, as well. Accordingly a system cannot have an existence independent from the operations, it exists exclusively because operations carry out the system/environment distinction typical of this system.
- Two central findings of Luhmann's theory are the thesis of operational closure and that of autopoiesis. The thesis of operational closure says that operations belonging to the system cannot leave it and other operations not belonging to the system cannot enter it. According to the thesis of autopoiesis a system produces its operations exclusively from its own former operations.

- After having reconstructed general systems theory I turned to the discussion of one of its types, namely social systems. The typical operational mode of social systems is communication. Luhmann defines communication as the simultaneous realization of three selections, i.e. information, utterance and understanding. Thereby Luhmann breaks with the tradition in which action was regarded as building block of sociality.

After this I analysed one type of social systems: the society. Luhmann's theory of society consists of three main components, i.e. theory of communication, theory of evolution, and systems theory.

- According to Luhmann communication theory has to answer three questions, as communication is an improbable phenomenon in three sense: 1.) Firstly, it is improbable that understanding happens. 2.) Secondly, it is improbable that communication reaches addressees that are spatially and temporarily far. 3.) And thirdly, it is improbable that communication will be successful, that is the addressee will behave as he is expected to. Three communication media serve as solutions for these improbabilities. Language eliminates the improbability of understanding, disseminating media – like writing, printing and electronic media – ensure reaching the addressees, and success media – namely symbolically generalized communication media – help to accept the communication.
- The second component of Luhmann's theory of society is evolution theory. Luhmann describes evolution by means of three mechanisms, namely variation, selection and restabilization. Luhmann associates every mechanism with one systems theoretical concept. Variation refers to the operations, selection is fulfilled by the structures, and restabilization is the task of the system. According to Luhmann evolution is also subject to evolution, that is the characters of evolution change with the transformation of society. In the most archaic, tribal or segmented societies the mechanisms of variation and selection were not separated, so we cannot speak about evolution. The socio-cultural evolution began with the evolving of stratified, hierarchical societies. In these societies, however, the separation of selection and restabilization was lacking, as selection, which was mainly determined by religion, served the maintenance of stability on the level of the whole society. The separation of selection and restabilization took place in the third type of

societies, the functional differentiated, that is modern societies. But here restabilization is based on stimulating variation, so these two mechanisms cannot be separated.

- The third component of Luhmann's theory of society is systems theory, which here means the examination of the forms of society's differentiation. Luhmann distinguishes four types of differentiation of society:
  - Segmented differentiation where the subsystems are equal.
  - Centrum/periphery differentiation, which means that society divides into unequal subsystems, and a centre rises.
  - In the stratified or hierarchical society the subsystems are in a sub- and overordinated relationship with each other.
  - The last differentiation form in Luhmann, which is typical of modern society, is functional differentiation, that is the subsystems are specialised to fulfil certain functions.

After this I analysed the reason why we need to choose the epistemological starting point applied if we characterize society as Luhmann does, that is why difference theory is the most adequate tool for describing modern society. This means the analysis Luhmann's sociology of knowledge.

- Luhmann's sociology of knowledge consists in the examination of the relationship between structure of society and semantics. Differing from other approaches, Luhmann's sociology of knowledge does not analyse the differences inside a given society, but the changes in modes of thinking caused by the transition from one type of societies to the other. In Luhmann's theory sociology of knowledge means the examination of semantic changes caused by the formation of modern society.
- In the early modernity the change of society's structure was not described with the help of a sociological theory, but of the so-called early modern anthropology, that is by means of the man. Luhmann's aim is to criticize this anthropocentric description of modernity that has an impact even today, and to substitute sociological methods for it. He calls this sociological enlightenment.

- According to Luhmann in the functional differentiated society we cannot take identity as a starting-point because of the disappearance of authority. We have to build up semantics without taking the observation's object for granted, instead it always has to be constructed by the observer. In Luhmann's view the difference theoretical starting-point fulfils this requirement. We have arrived at the point where we started the detailed reconstruction of Luhmann's theory, the circle has been closed.

In the foregoing I have examined Luhmann's theory in general. After this I analysed Luhmann's findings on politics.

- The political scientific or political philosophical questions appear in Luhmann's theory in two ways. On the one hand, politics is one of the functional subsystems of modern society, so everything is valid for it, what was said about the functional subsystems. On the other hand, Luhmann reinterprets the key concepts of political science and political philosophy. Among these questions I discussed the concept of state, legitimacy, democracy, public opinion and welfare state.
- Politics in Luhmann's theory is a functional subsystem of society, its function is to make collective binding decisions, its symbolic generalized communication medium is power. Political communication is distinguished from every other communication by the binary code government/opposition.
- Luhmann gives several definitions for the state. Firstly, state is the self-description of the political system, secondly, the territorial segment of the global political system, and thirdly, it is a central political organization.
- Luhmann refuses those legitimacy-concepts which take conviction or consensus as the ground of legitimacy and which state the question of legitimacy with reference to the content of the decision. In Luhmann legitimacy refers to the procedure of decision. According to Luhmann legitimacy is a general willingness within certain tolerance limits to accept decisions with undefined content, that is legitimacy is constructed by the procedure. Furthermore, we do not admit a procedure as legitime because we are convinced of its rightness, but due to a learning process.

- According to Luhmann democracy is not the rule of the people, neither a principle according to which every decision should be based on participation. In his view democracy is the bifurcation of the political system's top to government and opposition. The greatest achievement of the binary code government/opposition is that it gives power in a sense to the powerless, that is it does not exclude them fully, while at the same it ensures the possibility of power's concentration and governability.
- Opposed to other concepts of public opinion – to Habermas' theory above all – Luhmann states that the function of public opinion or of publicity is mainly not to articulate and to discuss private opinions and to reach consensus. In his view the role of public opinion is to narrow the possibilities of communication by means of themes.
- Luhmann regards welfare state as an inevitable consequence of the functional differentiated structure of modern society, but at the same time in his view expectations towards the welfare state cause unachievable requirements towards politics. This process always generates new problems and after all it endangers the autonomous operation of the functional systems.

We can summarize Luhmann's findings on politics in the following points:

- Luhmann regards politics as one of the modern society's functional subsystems, so it does not have a special position compared to other subsystems of the society. With this statement Luhmann opposes the approaches which attribute a special position to politics in society, and characterize it as an area that is capable of steering other fields of society.
- In the course of reinterpretation of the key concepts of political science Luhmann's most important novelty compared to former approaches is that he reconstructs these concept on the grounds of sociological viewpoints. We can say he sociologizes those concepts – like legitimacy, democracy, public opinion – whose former definition was based on philosophical or legal, that is on normative conceptions. In defining these concepts he takes the structure of modern society as a starting-point, and not the individum as did the other approaches.

- Because the meaning of most of the key concepts of political science is based on the modern society's structural features, they get a kind of complex-character. This means that concepts like legitimacy, democracy, public opinion or welfare state cannot be taken out from the context of modern society, and cannot be interpreted without the functional differentiated structure of society.
- The most remarkable and most disputed consequence of the sociologization of key concepts of politics is that the phenomena described by other theories as shortcomings of modernity, as deficits relating to an achievable optimal state, that is as phenomena which are remediable and to be remedied, appear in Luhmann as necessary consequences of modern society's structure, therefore not as remediable symptoms, rather as normality.

In the next chapter I studied Luhmann's theory in the context of four debates of social or political philosophy.

- In the context of the realism-structuralism debate Luhmann's standpoint has a special character. On the one hand, regarding the debate's epistemological or science philosophical aspect he holds definitely constructivist views. His constructivism belongs to the most radical ones, because he denies the possibility of any kind of operational connection between cognition and the world. Furthermore, he reinterprets the epistemological questions on the most basic level, that is he associates the basic epistemological concepts with the social systems. At the same time he rejects the subject/object difference as the starting-point of epistemology. However, regarding the cultural or political aspect of the debate, his views are closer to the realists' camp, as he does not question the authority of science.
- Luhmann thinks that the starting problem of the methodological individualism and collectivism debate, namely the individual/collective difference, is mistaken, because it cannot be reconciled with his systems theoretical starting-point, that is with the sharp demarcation of social, psychical and biological systems. However, Luhmann's theory can be analysed along this debate. He can be regarded as a collectivist inasmuch as he stresses the emergent character of social systems, but at the same time one of his most important

theoretical aims is such a redefinition of the social phenomena, with the help of which collectivist views could be defended against critiques, like the critiques on the ontological problems of structures, on the determinism, or on the functional explanation.

- Luhmann regards the human rights, or in his words the basic rights, not as universal rights inseparable from people, but as the concomitants of the functional differentiated society. The function of the basic rights is to save the autonomy of functional subsystems mainly against the bureaucratizing tendencies of politics.
- The last question was ideological positioning. Regarding the practical political principles the liberals' standpoint is closest to Luhmann. However, we will get another picture if we try to position him regarding theoretical or methodological questions. In this aspect his standpoint is mainly opposed to that of the liberals. In some points his view is similar to that of the conservatives or socialists, but he cannot be classified in any of these camps.

At the end I formulated two critiques against Luhmann's theory.

- The first of them says that politics has such essential differences in regularity, organization, centralization and in the importance of actors compared to other functional subsystems that in my opinion we cannot treat it analogously with them. As a possible solution I suggest that politics – opposed to other subsystems – should not be regarded as a macro-level system, but as a mezo-level one.
- My second critique refers to the concept Luhmann calls political theory. By political theory Luhmann does not mean a scientific theory, but the self-reflection of the political system, which orients the operating of politics. According to Luhmann the adequate political theory is lacking today, and in his view its construction would be mainly possible on the grounds of his theory of society. In my opinion Luhmann's theory is not suitable for this, mainly because it is not capable to provide such positive contents which would be able to make the political theory based on it attractive.

#### **4. List of my publications relating to the topic of my dissertation**

Papers in scientific journals and chapters in books:

1. A luhmanni elmélet felépítése és funkcionális aktualitása. In: Kiss Endre (ed.): Demokráciaelmélet és demokratikus deficittek a globalizáció korában, Friedrich Ebert Alapítvány, 2007. 66-74.
2. A luhmanni elmélet felépítése. In: Társadalomkutatás, 2007 (25)/3. 297-320.
3. A kognitív tudománytól az ismeretelméleten át a politikáig: George Lakoff empirikusan felelős filozófiája. In: Pro Philosophia Füzetek 2007, No. 51. 141-170.

Translations:

1. Niklas Luhmann: Bevezetés a rendszerelméletbe. Gondolat Kiadó, 2006.

Conference presentations:

1. Demokráciaelmélet az aktuális filozófiai viták összefüggésében. On the conference „Demokráciaelmélet és demokratikus deficittek a globalizáció korában” organised by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the German-Hungarian Philosophy Association, and Kodolányi János Highschool, Budapest, 28 April, 2006.
2. A politikai metaforák és a modern társadalom struktúrája. On the conference „Metafora, trópusok, jelentés” organised by the Eötvös Loránd University, Faculty of Arts, Philosophy Institute and by the Philosophy of Language Research Group of the Hungarian Academy of Science and Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, 28-29 September, 2006.
3. A politikai cselekvés lehetőségeinek a módosulása a globalizáció korában. On the conference „Globális és hazai problémák tegnaptól holnapig” organised by the Hungarian Academy of Science, Future Research Committee, Győr, 6-7 October, 2006.
4. Differencia és identitás Niklas Luhmann-nál. On the conference „Történelem és önazonosság (A modern identitás a filozófiai hagyomány és a klasszikus idealizmus szövegösszefüggésében)” organised by the German-Hungarian Philosophy Association, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, and the Kodolányi János Highschool, Budapest, 9-10 November, 2007.

5. Political Theory and Globalisation. Ont he annual meeting of the European Network for the Study of Globalisation, Fürstenfeld, Austria, 28-29. March, 2008.