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Marc Amstutz and Andreas Fischer-Lescano (eds),

Kritische Systemtheorie: Zur Evolution einer normativen Theorie, Transcript: Bielefeld, 2013; 410 pp.:

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Reviewed by João Paulo Bachur, Free University Berlin, Germany

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Critical theory, Niklas Luhmann, sociological theory, systems theory

The volume edited by Marc Amstutz and Andreas Fischer-Lescano presents studies that offer a critical perspective within Niklas Luhmann's systems theory. For those not familiar with the contemporary debates on this subject, this may sound like a contradiction in terms. After all, Luhmann insisted on pointing out a clear cleavage between Frankfurt and Bielefeld (Luhmann, 1990, 1993). Nevertheless, we can track a series of efforts to deploy Luhmann critically, even if this endeavour contradicts his original perspective. These efforts date back to the mid-1990s and by no means comprise a unified project (Demirović, 2001; Jessop, 1992, 2008; Schimank, 2009; Stäheli, 2000; and, more recently, Möller, 2012; Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2010). Nonetheless, the task is not simple nor has it concluded. To the contrary, the debate is only beginning and therefore deserves closer attention. In this sense, this volume should be welcomed by those who see an unexplored potential in systems theory that could be engaged in a critical account of modern society, for it could eventually open a new line of research that could provide new energy to both systems theory and critical theory. This volume is the first to explicitly present a conciliation of traditionally antagonistic views as the core of a collective theoretical project.

After a programmatic essay establishing the principles guiding a critical reading of systems theory (Fischer-Lescano, 'Systemtheorie als kritische Gesellschaftstheorie'), the chapters in the first section discuss the main features and viability of this endeavour, aided by a discussion of critical works of varied provenance (e.g. Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Zygmunt Bauman and the earlier Frankfurt School). The second section offers innovative perspectives on the responsiveness of global social systems, and is largely focused on the legal, political and economic systems of world society and its institutional features. In this section, the authors show how power and hegemonic struggles permeate the key institutions of world politics and global governance, while simultaneously indicating how these institutions could be democratized and made more transparent. The

themes range from global governance and the International Swaps and Derivatives Association to the possibility of a subaltern constitution, international labour regulation and an analysis of organizational failures, to mention just a few examples. Overall, the compilation makes clear that systems theory, often criticized for being too hermetic to enable concrete analysis, can be combined with diverse theoretical perspectives, and can be fruitful for institutional analysis. There is no point in reviewing here the individual aspects of almost 20 chapters, for they are unified around a common programmatic axis. And it is precisely between this programmatic axis and its application to the institutional analysis that we can identify the internal tension that holds the volume together and makes it so interesting.

This tension opposes the programmatic formulation of a critical systems theory as a *normative* approach and the way such a programme tests itself, because most of the chapters deploy systems theory as an analytical means for obtaining accurate *descriptions* of current pathologies of world society. Thus, the volume is structured by a tension between the normative and the descriptive.

The critical reinterpretation of Luhmann's systems theory in this volume maintains that it must not at all be only a pure description of society, a kind of sterile observation of the *autopoiesis* of social systems 'as they really are'. Systems theory could instead inform a normative theory that would be concerned with emancipatory aims. This would involve a concrete analysis of the institutional features of modern social systems, identifying their paradoxes, antinomies and contradictions, so that an emancipatory critique based on equity and justice (*Gerechtigkeit*) could take place. The programme is in itself irreprehensible. On the one hand, it avoids the old-fashioned reductionism of orthodox Marxism, focusing instead on the autonomous logic of institutional settings. On the other hand, it also avoids a peremptory condemnation of all institutions (for example Foucault), as if any serious challenge of the status quo could ever be performed without the institutional boundaries within which critical thought must proceed. It is, however, questionable if the features of a critical systems theory can really be traced back to Adorno. This programmatic layout appears to be a lot closer to Habermas than to the classic Frankfurt School, given that it identifies the *critical* perspective with a *normative* position.

According to Habermas, it is impossible to think of a critical theory that does not make its normative foundations explicit. Thus, a theory may present itself as critical if it states its commitment to emancipation, a normative core of basic human rights and basic principles of liberal democracy. This amalgamation is not only untouched by critical systems theory, it is also incorporated as the criterion for rereading Luhmann. The tension appears as soon as the authors question this programmatic orientation. Elke Wagner ('Systemtheorie und Frankfurter Schule'), for instance, argues that the real critical aspect of systems theory may be found not in its normative turn, but in its descriptive approach. In the same way, Tore Prien ('Kritische Systemtheorie und materialistische Gesellschaftstheorie') posits that critical systems theory must provide an accurate description of contemporary capitalism. Joachim Fischer ('Luhmann und Bourdieu') also states that the description of a polycentric society may be much richer than the proposed normative turn or than monistic Marxism. Most of the remaining chapters use systems theory to describe the functioning of global systems. Even when they adopt normative perspectives, systems theory provides the descriptive framework for the

analysis. These points illustrate the internal tension within the chapters in this book: although most of them are explicitly committed to a normative perspective, they actually offer competent descriptions of the institutional setting of contemporary world society. Some of them openly question the proposed normative turn, as previously noted.

Two final points close this brief overview. First, the Manichaeism of the opposition ‘normative versus descriptive’ seems less and less convincing. A change in the main features of Frankfurt-aligned critical theory may be starting to become visible, given that the normative paradigm seems to be weakening (although it is still to a great extent the dominant view). As a matter of fact, some key insights of Marxism, like alienation or the interplay between subjectivity and consumption, have been recently recovered (Jaeggi, 2005; Jaeggi and Loick, 2013). Eva Illouz (2013) even described her approach as ‘post-normative’ because it addressed the problem of commodification and reification of emotions. Second, the main problem with Habermas was that he devoted insufficient energy to framing an accurate diagnosis of modern capitalism, that is, he was not sufficiently descriptive. Habermas stated more than once that class conflicts were already (and definitively!) pacified in the welfare state, so that his democratic theory could take for granted that distributive problems are solved (Habermas, 1981, Vol. 2: 489 ff.; 1992: 374). Clearly, an accurate description of capitalism may be much more critical than an alleged commitment to emancipation. So the point seems to be: What is really at stake when we speak of critical systems theory – a normative claim for emancipation or an accurate description of capitalist society? How do modern processes of accumulation reproduce themselves? How do they relate to functional differentiation? Does functional differentiation reinforce capitalism or can it be seen as a force to resist it? As we see, there are important questions related to diagnosing capitalism that have not yet been addressed.

Perhaps no other sociological theory remains so open to resignification as Luhmann’s systems theory, regardless of its set of unusual concepts, which he derived from the most heterodox sources of biology, cybernetics and radical constructivism. This book is an important step in this direction. This statement, which contradicts the usual reservations with which readers approach Luhmann’s intricate construction, is precisely the assumption that guides the authors of this book as they reverse systems theory ‘to the left’. The strategy of arguing ‘with Luhmann against Luhmann’ is a remarkable endeavour that may bring new light to the somewhat saturated view of systems theory. The future developments of this programme should only take the precaution of not discarding precisely what enables a critical theory of society. After all, all we need is an accurate description of capitalism so that practical criticism can take place.

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Author biography

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Niklas Luhmann,

Love: A Sketch, Polity Press: Cambridge, 2010; 104 pp.: ISBN 0745647510, US\$14.95

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Keywords

Communication theory, sociology of love, systems theory

When I started my journey as a researcher, some of my mentors dissuaded me from studying the books of Niklas Luhmann: somehow, they considered Luhmann’s works too complex and not easy to read for an undergraduate student. Then, when I started my doctoral work, I thought that Luhmann’s work was far from the topics I was researching: on the one hand, teenagers’ sexuality, in its various aspects (e.g. love, emotions, sexual intercourses, gender identity): on the other hand, media studies, which was one of the major themes of my university courses. In fact, they thought that Luhmann could confuse a young sociologist and take him far from his duties. A few years later, I must say that they were right as regards the first point: it’s not easy to read and understand