

Reviews

Jiří Šubrt: The Systemic Approach in Sociology and Niklas Luhmann: Expectations, Discussions, Doubts

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The book focuses on one of the key topics of contemporary theoretical sociology, namely the systems theory. The author deals with the sociological conception of systems theory connected with the concept of social systems and tries to evaluate its contribution to contemporary sociology. The author recognizes systems theory as an “irreplaceable contribution to the analysis of the macrosocial phenomena” (p. 103) and its undeniable benefit for contemporary sociology. The author takes a critical approach to the topic; however, he considers systems theory an undeniable asset for sociology. The author sees the book as a “combination of fascination and criticism” of systems theory (p. 1) and aims to evaluate social systems theory critically. The individual parts of the book follow systematically and gradually explain the individual terms, presenting well- and lesser-known both sociological and natural thinkers who have influenced the theories of social systems with their approaches.

The book is divided into seven chapters, with the greatest attention and scope of the book devoted, of course, to Luhmann’s theory of social systems. The author also comprehensively examines Talcott Parsons, who was the first to formulate a systematic theory of social systems and define the social system as a network of interactions between actors. It was Parsons’ work that laid the foundations for the rest of the study of social systems theory and ignited the debate over what framework social systems should be built around. The author then entirely centres on Niklas Luhmann, who is also convinced that social systems actually exist and that sociology needs to be based on them. „From the point of view of constitutive principles, Luhmann distinguished the following types of systems: machine, organic, social, and psychological. Each type is constituted in a different way. Machines are the product of intentional human activity; organisms are based on biological processes, psychic systems on psychic processes, and social systems on communication. (p. 47).

The author uses succinct words such as “dream” and “myth” in the book. The word dream represents certain “expectations and visions” (p. 1) connected with the formulation of systems theories. The author partially distances himself from the word “myth”, since “being by no means as deeply critical and fundamentally apprehensive of systems theory as McClung Lee was, I do not consider “myth” – at least in the sense that he used it – the appropriate word. After all, “system” has become an expression so at home in our language

today, encountered in many writings of sociologists who do not espouse systems theory at all, and found in contexts where it would be difficult to replace it with any other term” (p. 2).

The chapter *The Dream a United Conception of Science* chronologically describes the rise of systems theory, with Herbert Spencer getting the most significant space and who created a parallel “between biological and social organisms in terms of an evolutionary process through which these become more and more internally differentiated and complex over time” (p. 5). The author draws on *The Study of Sociology* (1896), in which Spencer examines class and religious tendencies that usually disrupt the complex sociological research. From Spencer’s hypotheses, the author gradually refers to other authors who stem from Spencer’s theory. The change occurs when the author begins to describe “the formation of these structures is through processes of differentiation” (p. 6). The chapter smoothly turns to the difference in the concept of differentiation between H. Spencer, who forms structures through social differentiation, and T. Parsons and N. Luhmann, who support functional differentiation. The following text of the chapter looks at the general theory of systems with an emphasis on the scientific concept and methodology, which, according to Parsons and Luhmann, are an integral part of natural sciences and sociology.

Subsequently, the author pays attention to the founder of the general system theory, Ludwig von Bertalanffy, whose theory is based on the assumption that living organisms are open systems exchanging matter and energy with their environment and therefore cannot be described by conventional physical models for closed systems. From Bertalanffy’s theory, the author emphasizes holism over reductionism and opposes the organism to the mechanism. I want to highlight the subchapter *A General Theory of Systems and Related Disciplines* as, in my opinion, it is one of the best chapters of the whole book because its structure and overall insight into Bertalanffy’s logical-mathematical issues is brilliantly explained and, above all, well set in the sociological context, which smoothly continues with other sociological thinkers based on similar approaches.

The subchapter *What Is the Right Starting Point for Sociological Thought?* explains the differences between individualistic and holistic thinking. The author places more emphasis on holism, which emphasizes that all the properties of a system cannot be determined or explained by examining its component parts alone. Holism argues that the whole is more important than the sum of its parts, and each part has meaning only if we relate its meaning to the other parts or to the whole. Holism is based on the belief that reality cannot be understood according to its individual parts, but only in relation to the whole. The author focuses on Émile Durkheim, who is the founder of this

sociological thinking theory and somewhat sidelines other theoretical approaches of other sociologists. However, I would like to highlight the absolutely brilliant portrayal and depiction of holistic thinking, which is thoroughly explained and can undoubtedly serve as a textbook for sociologists and historical sociologists. I also very much appreciate the illustrative example of an interview with Margaret Thatcher for *Woman's Own* magazine in 1987. "(...) And, you know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families" (p. 22). In my opinion, this statement serves as an excellent example illustrating the differences between individualism and holism.

The author sidelines individualism, which may seem to be a relatively logical step, as individualism is the opposite of systemic thinking – the topic of the whole book. However, even in this case, the author tries to map the past and development of the relevant theory, focusing only on Max Weber and Jeffrey C. Alexander. On the one hand, I miss Karl Popper, for example, as an advocate of methodological individualism. On the other hand, I must appreciate the dedication to J. C. Alexander and his approach to individualistic and holistic thinking, which I lately see to be sort of sidelined. „Collectivist (i.e. holistic) theories stress the primacy of social entities (societies, systems, groups, classes, organisations, etc.), and the collectivist perspective is important in sociological thought because it forms the basic precondition by which entities can become the direct subject of sociological analysis. What needs to be considered, however, is at what cost this is achieved. The logical outcome of the emphasis these theories place on collectivity and collective entities is that freedom of human decision-making and the exercise of free will become impossible (Alexander 1987: 13).” (p. 17).

The chapter *A Dream of Integration of Theory and Society (Parsons)* followingly centres on one of the most influential sociologists of the 20th century, Talcott Parsons, his life and work, and, in particular, his definition of social systems. The author here maps and explains the development and changes of Parsons' ideas and attitudes and critically evaluates individual Parsons' stances. The author clearly divided the chapter, having the character of a lecture. The author systematically presents sociological thinkers and their theories, which Parsons followed or rejected during his life. „An important source of inspiration for Parsons in this area of his focus was the work of the functionalist anthropologists Bronislaw Malinowski (1884 – 1942) and Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881 – 1955). It was in their work that he came across the idea that society is a type of organism, and that the organism's individual parts perform specific (and specifiable) functions aimed at maintaining the system as a whole. All societies – regardless of whether large or small – seek to be in a state of equilibrium. If they are to attain this, the individual parts of the social

organism must execute their functions in so far as possible without disruption and conflict” (p. 28-29).

Thus, the author moves from accepting the mainstream opinions by Parsons to their rejection, which sometimes seems a bit chaotic. However, the author well incorporates individualism and holism the way Parsons understood it, smoothly continuing to the chapter *What Is the Right Starting Point for Sociological Thought?*

Niklas Luhmann follows in the footsteps of his teacher T. Parsons, surpassing his master in many ways because he saw society as an autopoietic system, that is, that systems cannot be understood as mechanisms because they are more like living organisms. According to Luhmann, the systems differentiate themselves from their environment, but they are connected to it. The most extensive part of *The Dream of the Sociological Super-theory* (Luhmann) could be summarized in a similar vein.

The author describes in detail Luhmann’s biography and the phenomena that influenced his work. I must emphasize that the author does not turn to Parsons, which would have made sense in many passages of this chapter; however, it would be at the expense of Luhmann.

In this chapter, the author cleverly combines previous terms, concepts, and theoretical approaches of individual sociology representatives that contributed to Luhmann’s super-theory. “With the increasing complexity of social systems, there is the problem – both practical and theoretical – of how to reduce multiplicity. Because “only complexity can reduce complexity” (Luhmann 1984: 49), not only society but also theory concerning it must be increasingly complex. In Luhmann’s own words, system theory should become a “super-theory” comparable to petrol “with an increased octane number” (Reese-Schäfer 1992: 101). Luhmann connects the explanatory potential of this “super-theory” with the concept of autopoiesis, which he takes from cognitive biology. His acceptance of this concept (in the late 1970s) meant a fundamental turning point in his thinking, sometimes characterised as a “paradigmatic shift” in systems theory (Staubmann 1995: 190).” (p. 51).

The author describes in detail Luhmann’s sociological theory composed of many variables. Although the author highlights Luhmann’s theory, he keeps his distance and tries to evaluate it from many angles through critical discussion. In my opinion, the author excellently recapitulated Luhmann’s theory of social systems because there are many approaches and perspectives that Luhmann uses to create his theory and are often very difficult to grasp. However, the author succeeded.

In conclusion, I would like to state that the book *The Systemic Approach in Sociology and Niklas Luhmann: Expectations, Discussions, Doubts* (2020) very clearly explains and maps the concept of social systems, leaving enough room

for a critical evaluation of the sociological systems theory. For this reason, the most significant benefit of this book is the content and clarity, which are particularly suitable for students of bachelor's, master's, and doctoral studies.

Markéta Minářová
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