

LOVE AS PASSION



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Niklas Luhmann

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Love as Passion

The Codification of Intimacy

NIKLAS LUHMANN

Translated by Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones

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Preface to the English Edition

In writing this book I had the German reader and thus a specific social and intellectual context in mind. The English translation places the text in a different setting, adding to the difficulties of trying to understand a highly demanding theoretical argument. Despite the fact that in recent years there has been a more ready interchange of ideas internationally, many notions in the book retain a local colouring, last but not least because, whereas readers in Germany keep up with works published in English without difficulty, the same cannot be said to an equal degree for English-speaking readers. Since the publisher has kindly allowed me to preface the English edition, I would like to take this opportunity to explain a number of the underlying assumptions of the book which are not dealt with in sufficient detail there. In particular, it is necessary to distinguish between several different theoretical complexes which all serve to place the present work in the framework of current discussion in the field of the social sciences.

The book can be viewed as a case study that attempts to use theoretical tools to describe, if not actually explain, historical material. General discussions in Germany about the relationship between theory and history have not as yet been particularly fruitful. There are a number of different reasons for this. On the one hand, the wealth of historical facts which historians are able to dig up from their sources never fails to dash all attempts at theoretical treatment, unless one concedes from the outset that any theory has to be selective in approach. Moreover, historians and sociologists customarily have their own different ways of treating empirical data, and thus both professions can justifiably accuse each other of making unwarranted generalizations. Finally, sociological theory – or so it seems to me, at any rate – is

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nowhere near complex enough, and above all is not elaborated in sufficiently abstract terms as to be able really to tackle the wealth of historical data. The only possible path one can take in order to uncover the details (or, as in the present case, the boring, old-fashioned pedantry of a body of often mediocre literature) leads via the detour of theoretical abstraction.

As far as the history of ideas is concerned, I have allowed myself to be guided by the project outlined by the editors of the dictionary of *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*,¹ and I have adopted their usage of the term 'semantics'.² This project starts from the assumption that the basic semantic terms used to describe either society or time underwent a radical change during the second half of the eighteenth century; even words which remained the same took on new meanings. Historians, however, have not explained the reasons for this transformation, but have merely confirmed that it did indeed occur.

Foucault's 'archaeology' and the concept of discourse it employs are equally unsatisfactory in this respect. Disregarding for the moment the philosophical battle lines Foucault draws up, i.e. his attack on both a linear philosophy of history and the programme of enlightenment centred on reason – a stance he uses to justify his methodology – a sociologist would be likely to go one step further and endeavour to establish what restrictions were imposed by the social structure on possible discourse. Moreover, the concept of power does not provide an adequate explanation for the force exerted by discourse over life, the empirical nature of which is also probably overestimated. It seems to me that historical research needs a stronger theoretical basis with respect both to 'historical semantics' and the 'archaeology of discourse'.

It is most probable that the sociologist would try and draw on the classical writings on the 'sociology of knowledge' when attempting to overcome this weakness. However, on closer examination this too does not provide an adequate theoretical foundation. It seems that, since the 1920s, development has come to a standstill in two areas. First of all, even if we ignore the inherent difficulties involved in any theory of social class, relating facts to social classes allows us to observe at best only partial phenomena. The only way out of this predicament is, or so Karl Mannheim suggested, to resort to generalization. Class is replaced

as a concept by all forms of social position, a step which, however, should necessitate a process of respecification, because notions such as 'position' or 'relativity of being' must be regarded as poor substitutes for a theory which has not yet been found.

Secondly, the sociology of knowledge has been stranded in epistemological difficulties that it has not been able to solve by means of the classical theory of cognition. The truth content of its own statements, which are intended to relativize true (or supposedly true) statements, has never been unequivocally established. One might conceive of a sociology of knowledge of the sociology of knowledge – or a sociology of knowledge of the free-floating intellectual; but in the end we would only come up against the paradoxes known to us ever since Antiquity as inherent in a Reason that tries to enlighten itself – a process Foucault has attempted to undermine using the spade of archaeology.

But how are we to extricate ourselves from this embarrassing state of affairs? If none of this works, what can one do 'instead'?

I cannot for many reasons share the faith Jürgen Habermas places in the opportunities afforded by resorting to a paradigm of intersubjective understanding.³ It is above all difficult to conceive of how a sufficiently complex theory of society resulting from an intersubjective understanding could be generated by the discourses of everyday life. Instead, it would seem to me to make more sense to utilize certain of the theoretical resources that have already been quite extensively elaborated in the course of interdisciplinary research on a cybernetics of self-referential orders, on general systems theory, on autopoiesis and on information and communication.⁴

In the following study of the semantics of love, the epistemological problems which could not be solved using a sociology of knowledge are dealt with in a new way: they are treated as a problem of observing observations, of describing descriptions, of calculating calculations within self-referential systems. Heinz von Foerster has called this 'second order cybernetics'. In this context the term 'epistemological constructivism' is also used, but a discussion of this would take up so much space that I must instead refer the reader to the literature in question.⁵ This approach at the same time allows us to establish premises on which a theory of society could be based. It is possible, using this methodology, to treat society as a social system that consists

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solely of communications and therefore as a system that can only reproduce communications by means of communications. This also includes communications by the society about itself (in particular: theories of society). All other conditions for the evolution of society and its day to day functioning, including life and human consciousness, belong to the *environment* of this system.

In current debates it has been this unusual design for a theory that has met with the greatest resistance, owing no doubt to the continued presence of a tradition of humanism. But from the standpoint of systems theory, 'environment' is by no means an area to be considered of secondary importance; on the contrary, it is the single most important condition for systems formation. In other words, the theoretical approach used here proposes to abandon such guiding principles as humankind, the human species, the norms of rational life style, or the telos of intellectual history or of human life, and replace them by a differentiation between system and environment. And this proposal is motivated by the idea that it is much more fruitful and leads to more theoretical constructs if theory is built on a difference, instead of a global unity. This theory begins, as does George Spencer Brown's logic, by obeying the instruction: 'draw a distinction!'⁶

What this theoretical model does have in common with Foucault's work is a clearly post-humanistic perspective, which would appear to have become unavoidable, now that humanism has exhausted itself in its exaltation of the subject. And like Foucault, I am not interested in finding some nice, helpful theory oriented towards the 'Good', and much less in basking in indignation at the current state of affairs. But, whereas Foucault would speak in terms of the power of discourse over our suffering bodies, systems theory analyses a relationship between system and environment. The latter approach also allows us to demonstrate that we love and suffer according to cultural imperatives. Indeed, systems theory additionally makes it possible to create a complex theoretical apparatus that can describe the non-random character of variations in social relations, if not actually explain the individual characteristics of the latter of these. In other words, one does not have to leave the genesis of the particular discourses and their subsequent disappearance unexplained. The dominant semantics of a given period becomes

plausible only by virtue of its compatibility with the social structure – not in the sense of a mere ‘reflection’, and by no means in the sense of a relationship of the superstructure. Compatibility is the more elaborate concept. It also embraces the problems of evolutionary, transitional states in which the losses in plausibility experienced by the old order that is passing have to be compensated for and new figures of meaning tested for their suitability to the changed conditions.

The present work deals with only a minute facet of this enormous theoretical programme and is informed by two hypotheses:

- 1 that the transition from traditional societies to modern society can be conceived of as the transition from a primarily stratified form of differentiation of the social system to one which is primarily functional
- 2 that this transformation occurs primarily by means of the differentiation of various symbolically generalized media of communication.

This change destroyed the traditional order of life, which had been based primarily on stratified family households, religious cosmology and morals, i.e. on multifunctional institutions. These were replaced by a primary orientation towards such systems as the economy, politics, science, intimacy, law, art, etc., which thus all acquired a high degree of systemic autonomy, and yet precisely because of this became all the more interdependent.

This conception can be elaborated by means of both systematic and historical analyses. One could, for example, demonstrate systematically that functional systems are able to combine their autonomy, which is based on specific functions, with having to depend greatly on fulfilling other functions in their environment, and describe the manner in which this occurs. In other words, they operate simultaneously as closed and open systems.⁷ Historical research is faced with the problem that all evolutionary theory has to contend with: namely, that this radical transformation is effected in small, barely perceptible steps. The present case study serves to show that, while the stratified order and family systems remained intact, a semantics for love developed to accommodate extra-marital relationships, and was then transferred back into marriage itself, thus providing a basis

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for the latter's differentiation – libertinage as a case of evolutionary good fortune, if you will.

The distinction between the theory of social systems and the theory of symbolically generalized media of communication, two areas that should belong together, runs counter to the distinction between a systematic and an historical perspective. In this context 'media' is not meant in the sense of mass media, but rather in the sense of the *symbolically generalized media of interchange*, as defined in the theory Parsons developed. However, Parsons considers the emergence of media to be a *consequence* of the functional differentiation of the action system (and this differentiation is in turn already implied in the concept of action). This is why Parsons speaks of 'media of interchange' and explains them in terms of the necessity of reconnecting the two differentiated systems.

I feel unable to adopt this theoretical model, because I doubt whether a complete functional matrix (the four-function paradigm) and thus a complete theory of symbolically generalized media can be deduced from the concept of action.⁸ Consequently, I see the question of the connection between systems theory and media theory not as a fixed link, but as one open to change. It is not predetermined by the conceptual structure of systems theory, but rather remains in essence open to evolution. This makes historico-empirical investigations all the more necessary. I think of symbolic media as codes which offer relatively improbable communicative intentions, nevertheless, some prospect of success; or as codes which exclude fairly effectively the danger of abuse or of illusion or of errors in the use of particular symbols.⁹ Media underpin relatively improbable communication. They make trust possible, if not in fact necessary.¹⁰ In this capacity, media codes can be conceived of as catalysts which necessarily bring about a differentiation of complex social systems, once their use has become sufficiently dependable and constant enough to be foreseeable. In this manner, the differentiation of the economy is a consequence of the use of money; the differentiation of politics a consequence of the use of power; the differentiation of science a consequence of the use of truth – and in each case this takes place once a sufficiently effective semantics has become available by means of which one can distinguish between the use of money

and the use of power, etc. (which, for example, was not possible on the basis of land ownership alone).

The following study of the evolution of a special semantics for passionate love thus draws on theoretical sources of a highly diverse nature. And, above all, it is not so ambitious as to attempt to prove that things had to happen the way they did for reasons that can be clearly understood in terms of theory. There are other, methodologically less rigorous, less demanding ways of deploying theoretical concepts in order to select and interpret historical data and texts. If the aim is to link a very complex theory – and how today could a theory of society be otherwise – to a wide, hopefully representative collection of historical material, then one cannot at the same time set one's methodological sights too high. This is why the form of an historical case study has been chosen here, which has meant not only taking a narrow cross section of material, and one selected with great theoretical care, but also making only highly selective use of the manifold possibilities afforded by the theoretical apparatus. This procedure does not by any means exclude the possibility of the theorist learning in the course of completing historical studies and adjusting his theory to the findings. Historical research is one of the reasons why a theory must be complex, and the aesthetics of the theory suffers if it is dipped into a bath of historical facts. But if a theory is sufficiently complex, it can also itself recognize which of its assumptions it has to change or differentiate if it is to be able to recast those facts in its own theoretical language.

Niklas Luhmann, Bielefeld, August 1985

Introduction

The following investigations into the 'semantics of love' combine two different theoretical complexes. On the one hand, these studies are to be seen in the context of writings on the sociology of knowledge concerning the transition from traditional to modern forms of society. Other writings on this subject have appeared in a previous publication,¹ and I intend to conduct further research in this area. These investigations rest on the assumption that the social system's transformation from a stratified to a functional mode of differentiation generates profound changes in the conceptual resources that enable a society to ensure the continuity of its reproduction and the adaption of one action to another. In the course of such evolutionary transformations, word forms, set phrases, adages and precepts may very well continue to be handed down over the generations; however, their meaning changes and with it the way in which they pinpoint a specific referent, encapsulate particular experiences and open up new perspectives. A shift occurs in the pivotal point from which complexes of meaning direct actions, so that as long as the conceptual resources are rich enough, they can pave the way for and accompany profound changes in social structures quickly enough for these to seem plausible. Such a shift permits structural transformations to proceed with relative rapidity, indeed often in a revolutionary fashion, without these having to create all the necessary preconditions for change beforehand.

The second framework of this investigation will be provided by a preliminary outline of an overall theory of generalized symbolic media of communication. In other words, love will not be treated here as a feeling (or at least only secondarily so), but rather in terms of its constituting a symbolic code which shows how to communicate effectively in situations where this would otherwise

appear improbable. The code thus encourages one to have the appropriate feelings. Without this, La Rochefoucauld believed, most people would never acquire such feelings. Indeed, Englishwomen who try to emulate characters in pre-Victorian novels have to wait for visible signs of nuptial love before allowing themselves to discover consciously what love is. In other words, we are not dealing with a pure invention of sociological theory, but rather with something that has long been the subject of consideration in studies of the semantics of love. A generalized theory can only contribute abstract insights, but these in turn enable comparisons to be made between love and things of a completely different nature, such as power, money and truth; accordingly, additional knowledge is gained and love is thus shown to be not a mere anomaly, but indeed a quite normal improbability.

Increasing the probability of the improbable – such is the formula that links social theory, evolutionary theory, and a theory of the media of communication. Any normalization of more improbable social structure makes greater demands on the media of communication, is reflected in their semantics; evolution is the concept that will be used to explain how this phenomenon comes about.

The historical studies on the semantics of love are embedded in this theoretical framework. Naturally they cannot, strictly speaking, claim to provide a methodological verification of evolutionary theory, but with regard to methodology, however, they do provide two complementary, pragmatic insights. The one shows that only highly abstract sociological theories of a very complex nature can bring historical material to life: access to the concrete is only reached by treading the path of abstraction. Sociology is thus far too little developed in terms of theory and abstraction for fruitful historical research to be fully elaborated. The second insight is that temporal sequences possess a unique evidential quality with respect to complex phenomena – a form of proof, however, which has so far not been adequately clarified in methodological terms.

Parsons occasionally toyed with the idea that a differentiated system is only a system because it has arisen from processes of differentiation. Research into historical semantics reinforces such a view. Apparently, evolution experiments with adaptive capacity.

When viewed synchronically, highly complex matters clearly appear to be intertwined. This interconnectedness can be deemed contingent, but it is then nearly impossible to exclude other combinations as being less valid or less probable. An historical investigation uncovers such affinities more readily, in that it demonstrates how an existing system or a thoroughly formulated, consistently ordered semantics predetermines its own future (even though it in principle must be thought of as undetermined). This is most evident in the history of science: it can hardly be pure chance that scientific discoveries are triggered off which subsequently prove themselves to be true. Truth becomes manifest within the process.

This maxim could perhaps be generalized to serve as a heuristic tool, as is illustrated by the following example from the historical case studies. Sociological theory postulates abstractly that a relation obtains between the differentiation of generalized symbolic media of communication and the regulation of their 'real assets' (Parsons), i.e. their symbiotic mechanisms. This approach can be demonstrated by comparing the connections between truth and perception, love and sexuality, money and elementary needs as well as between power and force. Employing this hypothesis, historical research shows further that the differences between the *amour passion* complex of the French and the Puritans' notion of marriage based on 'companionship' created different preconditions for their respective adaptability, specifically in the following context: only the semantics of *amour passion* was sufficiently complex, as we shall show in detail, to absorb the revaluation of sexuality that occurred in the eighteenth century. Despite having provided a preliminary basis for the integration of love and marriage, and under the same conditions as the French, the English were only able to come up with the Victorian malformation of sexual morality. This historical *sequence* reveals an underlying *factual* connection – particularly in the *diversity* of the reactions it uncovers – to *one and the same problem*. Admittedly (despite what Weber says) this offers only an unsatisfactory methodological explanation.

I shall not go into the circumstances and results of this approach here, because the nature of the connections involved is too complex to be summarized briefly. Their sequential presentation in chapters is thus itself something of a compromise. Since factual

complexes, historical changes and regional differences are often interwoven, it was not possible to divide the study in such a manner that each chapter would deal with one specific aspect. The literature I worked with is indicated in the notes. I have drawn in addition on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century novels which were at first closely intertwined with aphoristic and discursive literature, only for this link to slowly dissolve. This created certain difficulties in evaluating the material. Although it has been known since the seventeenth century that novels assume the role of providing instruction and orientation in affairs of the heart, it is difficult to break this insight down into individual theses, concepts, theorems and precepts. All that can be determined is that the behaviour of characters in novels is code-oriented, i.e. they tend to animate the code rather than expand upon it. In the case of important works, such as the *Princesse de Clèves* and the subsequent train of novels on the renunciation of worldly pleasure that followed in its wake, the exceptions to the rule will readily meet the eye. I made a point of looking for second- and third-rate literature, and allowed myself to be guided by a very subjective principle in selecting the quotations, namely, that of stylistic elegance. It may therefore be attributed to a personal love of the material that I could not bring myself to translate quotations from widely spoken European languages.

Society and Individual

Personal and Impersonal Relationships

It is most assuredly incorrect to characterize modern society as an impersonal mass society and leave it at that. Such a view arises partly owing to an overly narrow conception of society and partly because of a set of optical illusions. If society is conceived of primarily in terms of economic categories, that is, its economic system, then it necessarily follows that impersonal relationships are the rule, for this is indeed the case within the economic system. But the economy is only one of the various factors determining social life. It is true even for individuals, of course, that only impersonal relationships can be established with most other people. If society is therefore taken to be the sum-total of possible relationships, it will appear, for the most part, to be impersonal. At the same time, however, it is *also* possible for individuals in some cases to intensify personal relationships and to communicate to others much of what they believe to be most intimately theirs and find this affirmed by others. Bearing in mind that everyone can enter into such relationships, and indeed many do, these too must be judged to exist on a massive scale.¹ Moreover, in modern society to avail oneself of this option is typically neither subject to any restrictions nor encumbered by the need to make allowances for other relationships.

We shall accordingly assume in the following that modern society is to be distinguished from older social formations by the fact that it has become more elaborate in two ways: it affords more opportunities both for impersonal and for more intensive personal relationships. This double adaptive capacity can be