

Niklas  
Luhmann

TRUST AND  
POWER

# Luhmann

## TRUST AND POWER

In this important book, Niklas Luhmann uses his powers as an analyst of the social system to examine two of the most important concepts that hold that system together and allow it to evolve: trust and power. He criticizes those theoretical accounts whose roots lie in what he refers to as ideologies – accounts which use implicit beliefs in particular conceptions of human nature to explain and predict social action in a one-dimensional way. Theories of rational choice and moralistic explanations are taken to task, as are the theories of both Marx and Habermas. Luhmann's unique scientific sociology underpins every page and enables him to highlight the potential shortcomings of these narrative approaches. Underlying this approach is the idea that ideologically based social theory, whether critical or conservative, is unable to do justice to the complexities existing within the parameters of social systems, individuals, and the interactions between them. Luhmann aims to show instead how only a painstaking systems analysis can capture these intricacies.

Although written over forty years ago, Luhmann's complex vision of the operations of trust and power provides a wealth of insights of considerable value to scholars and students grappling with contemporary social and economic problems. The editors' introduction to this new edition and the significant revisions they have made to the translation will help reveal the richness and clarity of this vision and its relevance to the ways that trust and power operate in today's society.

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Niklas Luhmann

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by Christian Morgner and Michael King

Original translation by Howard Davies, John Raffan  
and Kathryn Rooney

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# Niklas Luhmann's Sociological Enlightenment and its Realization in *Trust and Power*

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*Christian Morgner and Michael King*

## Sociological Enlightenment

Those engaged in the discipline of sociology, as it has evolved in English-speaking countries, may be forgiven if they have had some difficulty in recognizing these two books as bearing any close resemblance to what they have come to know as sociological research. After all, they make no attempt to apply established and respected empirical research methods to uncover facts about the ways in which people trust or exercise power, and to provide causal explanations for such facts. On the theoretical level, Luhmann's account may also appear strangely lacking in explanations of human social behaviour that would be amenable to testing through research in the way that Karl Popper recommended as marking the difference between science and non-science. Luhmann offers no explanations as such, but presents descriptive accounts of processes, using a conceptual framework that he himself has created. Yet, despite all this, Luhmann insists that the task he has undertaken is well and truly sociological, and rightly so, as this introduction will explain.

For Luhmann, the serious problems of fragmentation and credibility faced by the social sciences today can be traced back to the European Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The old certainties – the belief in the capacity of human intelligence to develop a transcendental rationality, and the idea of infinite progress through this increased knowledge – seemed to work well for a time as a self-description of intellectual human endeavour. Where sociology was concerned, however, Luhmann saw this quest for truth and progress as an unfortunate starting point. It did not lead, as it was expected to do, to increased knowledge opening the way to a better world. Instead what has emerged is a multitude of coexisting theories and hypotheses which give the impression of employing reliable scientific methods, but which depend ultimately for their validity on the particular belief

about human nature that the particular sociological observer subscribes to.

If sociology is to achieve its potential as a science, what is needed, according to Luhmann, is a new kind of enlightenment – a sociological enlightenment – one that rejects the unsustainable beliefs of ‘old Europe’ by devising a totally new way of understanding what society consists of and how it could be studied. This is the *Soziologische Aufklärung* (sociological enlightenment). Moreover, for Luhmann, sociology is uniquely placed to enlighten society about itself. ‘Sociology is enlightenment’, he explained, ‘when it observes society in a manner different from the way society in its different milieux observes itself.’<sup>1</sup> This is also meant to enlighten sociology itself by establishing a theoretical vocabulary that is on the one hand much more capable of grasping the complexity, eventfulness and ambiguities of social life, but on the other hand much more rigorous and encompassing in its approach. This puts emphasis on probing and challenging established patterns of thinking by comparing and relating them to, and contrasting them with, one another. Society is not seen as a natural outcome of human action, but as an improbable result of contingent events. Luhmann is here particularly interested in how these improbabilities are transformed into systems of meaning-generating communications. These are the generalized media of communication, of which trust and power are but two examples. The next stage, the embryos of which are visible in *Trust* and *Power*, but which is not fully developed until his later works on different social systems, is to observe how, within each system itself, the capacity evolves for constructing its own unique version of its environment, so that one is left with not just one overriding version of what society accepts as truth and reality, but with several versions, which coexist uneasily and which continually re-establish their own identity through developing new ways of accommodating the versions of reality produced by other systems. This, for Luhmann, is what both typifies modern society and makes classical, Enlightenment-based sociology so ill-equipped to capture the complexity of that society.

However, Luhmann would not have been Luhmann had he not added an ironic twist to the notion of circularity or self-reference, whereby within each system events are explained in terms of pre-existing assumptions of what constitutes truth and reality. ‘Of course, sociology’, he writes, ‘is nothing but a milieu of its own.’<sup>2</sup> So, as a result of this new sociological enlightenment, the uniquely sociological way of observing society necessarily and inevitably becomes yet another ‘milieu’, another system which observes society observing society itself. But at least this time the starting point is exclusively sociological, rather than based on moral beliefs or, as Luhmann puts it, ethical concerns, and at least this time the language, concepts and methods that it deploys are rigorous and sociological. Luhmann further explains that if sociology wants to see itself as a ‘critical’ science it cannot simply interpret itself as an opposition science that takes

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sides in the dispute between progressive and conservative ideologies.<sup>3</sup> This can only lead to a failure to reflect upon the unity of the difference. A 'critical' project would mean that sociology is in a position to distinguish and is able to reflect upon the use of its distinctions. In his short, enigmatic Preface to *Trust*, Luhmann takes a little further his explanation of the nature of this project. He provides an account of how one should distinguish his new approach to societal analysis from what he sees as the ideologically committed sociological thinkers whose work was influential in Germany at the time he was writing his book.<sup>4</sup> He identifies what he sees as 'the disadvantages' that can arise from importing into sociology 'terms and concepts from daily usage concerning the traditional world of ethical ideas'. These disadvantages predominate where this 'introduction of the moral into sociological concepts' takes the form of a 'critical demolition and surprising presentation of the familiar in unfamiliar ways or of unmasking ideological beliefs'. Clearly this is a mild but direct attack on members of the Frankfurt School who were indeed engaged in producing a version of sociology which involved investigations of what Luhmann regarded as moral issues and, in many instances, a commitment to one particular side in the moral debate. In the aftermath of the overthrow of National Socialism in the Second World War, this, for Luhmann, was indeed 'an easy trick to perform'. Luhmann ends his Preface by telling his readers of a new kind of sociology, one that does not rely on moral implants but instead seeks 'to establish its intellectual position in positive terms by *formulating a theory of its own*'.<sup>5</sup> Only once this has been established, he remarks, might it be advantageous to enter into a dialogue with those morality-based understandings of the world.

As we have already noted, Luhmann made it clear in the *Soziologische Aufklärung* essays that he wrote at around this time that the task of his systems approach to functional analysis would be to offer a theory which would allow sociology to identify the concepts and processes that increase the likelihood of people acting together in communal ways and of these interactions repeating themselves in a way that provides stability for the participants. As Luhmann explains, 'Functional analysis is not a matter of establishing connections between established reasons or reliable knowledge in order to generate secondary knowledge.' Rather, 'Problems are posed in terms of the maintenance of stability of action systems.'<sup>6</sup> What then are these 'systems' and what is their role in Luhmann's theory?

### The Meaning of Systems

Luhmann uses the term 'systems' in a very specific way – a fact that is very often missed by those who wish to classify him as a systems theorist in the traditional sense.<sup>7</sup> Early anthropological and previous functionalist theories understood systems through the existence of networks of people and

describe the ways that individuals or groups of individuals, who are seen as belonging to the same organization or institution, relate to one another. The identification of a system and its description rely for their validity on the assumption of naturalism in the social world. Social systems exist naturally in society just as physical systems exist in the natural world. This makes it possible for observers of social systems to capture reality through unproblematic descriptions of what they are and what they do. In a similar way, people can be seen as belonging to a system. Judges, therefore, are part of the legal system, for example, and psychiatrists part of the medical system. Yet these predominantly naturalistic principles fail to capture the idea of the system as developed by Luhmann. Within his theory, systems are not simply parts of the natural world or extensions of physical entities. They are not subject to laws and logic governing their operations, the discovery of which increases the possibilities for control and improvement.

In contrast to these naturalistic accounts of systems, modern systems theory, as represented by, for example, Ludwig von Bertalanffy, Ralph Gerard, Kenneth Boulding and Anatol Rapoport, advances the idea that systems are open because they have external interactions.<sup>8</sup> In sociology, the most prominent author associated with this systems theory thinking is Talcott Parsons. Parsons presents a theory that attempts to understand system structures in terms of the functions they serve in the maintenance of structural patterns and how this persistence of the system could be explained through different variables. This systems theory received considerable criticism. According to the critics, human beings are seen as being reduced to mere tokens within a structure over which they have no control. Impersonal systems appear to be more powerful than individuals. Moreover, systems are not open to change, because their maintenance is necessary for the maintenance of society and social institutions and they are not open to deviant behaviour or fringe groups. It is clear that these criticisms were based not purely on scientific principles, but to a substantial degree on ideological grounds. This is something that we shall take up later in our introduction.

Although Luhmann calls his theory a systems theory, it is conceptually far removed from the sociological Anglo-American tradition of systems theories. His notion of systems, one cannot over-emphasize, is 1) anything but metaphysical or analytical, and 2) not concerned with structural maintenance, but with highly dynamic meaning-making. Firstly, Luhmann's conception of the system is not an analytical construct; systems are real-world empirical phenomena. His often quoted statement from the first chapter of his book *Social Systems*, 'The following considerations assume that there are systems',<sup>9</sup> does not mean that systems have an essence-like existence making them readily amenable to identification, description and research. Rather, as he states, '*the concept of systems refers to something that is in reality a system and thereby incurs the responsibility of testing its statement against reality*'.<sup>10</sup> In other words, Luhmann assumes that the

reproduction and redundant formation of systems is an empirical reality. He therefore wants to devise sociological concepts whose validity ultimately depends on there being a reality against which they can be tested. He is seeking a close connection with empirical research that can be directed by those concepts. For instance, it is well known that Luhmann refers in his systems theory not to people, but to networks of communications. This does not mean that social systems could exist without people (or psychic systems), but that the meaningful reproduction and determination of meaning is a self-referential process determined by subsequent sequences of communication rather than by the will of individual human beings, the concerted efforts of groups of human beings, or some external force. Luhmann's notion of meaning has often been overlooked or misinterpreted, with the result that his insistence on systems of communication rather than people has been seen as anti-humanist or as evidence that he simply and wilfully ignored the importance of people. This is a fundamental misreading of Luhmann's intentions.

Secondly, Luhmann's systems theory is concerned with highly dynamic meaning-making in a complex world. Meaning-making cannot be grasped through the older models of systems theory that relied on presuppositions that defined in advance what the world is, as, for instance, in Parsons' assumption of an a priori integration through values and norms. Luhmann suggests that such an external position of an observer is not possible, because every observer is already part of this process of meaning-making. Luhmann's opening statement, citing Spinoza, to his *Theory of Society* acknowledges this direction: 'That which cannot be conceived through anything else must be conceived through itself.'<sup>11</sup> Meaning is not determined through an external structure (values or people), but meaning determines meaning. It is this self-referential dynamic of the term 'system' that Luhmann is interested in, or what he called 'a system that unfolded an intellectual dynamic all of its own, which is among the most fascinating phenomena that we are able to witness today'.<sup>12</sup> It is this new paradigm of the system that has led to a "'meaningful" revolutionization of the theory of society'.<sup>13</sup> This means that systems and communications relate to, and only to, the organization of meaning. They should not be understood as objects but *as observations and only as observations*. These observations in turn should not be understood as facts or objects 'but as boundaries, as markings of differences'.<sup>14</sup> An observation can be defined as both a distinction and an indication: something is distinguished, as an object or a subject, from something else and, through this distinction, it is indicated. For instance, the government can be distinguished *through observation* from its opposition, what is lawful can be distinguished from what is unlawful *only through observations*, and these observations, once made, allow for subsequent operations to make distinctions based on the distinctions government/opposition and lawful/unlawful. Observations, then, are not vehicles but

the very operations that constitute a system. 'The system can constitute operations of its own only further to operations of its own and in anticipation of further operations of the same system.'<sup>15</sup>

At the level of society, these then are Luhmann's function systems. They are functional systems because they cope with the generation of specific meanings over time. These concepts of systems and function are quite unlike the notions inherent in traditional systems theory, including that of Talcott Parsons. The 'functional analysis' Luhmann undertakes in *Trust* and *Power* is not a matter of making connections either between systems of people or between bodies of existing knowledge, but of examining how precarious meaning-making and its identity, which allows the formation of society, emerges from the relation between system and environment in a complex world.

In *Trust*, and to a lesser extent in *Power*, Luhmann describes the way that social systems are able to solve a very specific problem for society – that of stabilizing communications over time. As he writes in Chapter 2 of *Trust*, '[a] theory of trust presupposes a theory of time'. There follows a fascinating discussion concerning the two ways of identifying time – either as a series of events or as a constancy, 'a continuously actual present, with the future always in prospect and the past flowing away'. Since trust can only be secured and maintained in the present, 'the basis of all trust is an enduring continuum of changing events, as the totality of constancies where events can occur'. For Luhmann, the problem of trust (as for all social systems) lies in the fact that 'the future contains far more possibilities than could ever be realized in the present and transferred to the past'.<sup>16</sup> This places an excessive burden on people, who risk being frozen into immobility or indecisiveness by the prospect of a wholly uncertain future or, as Luhmann puts it, 'this everlastingly over-complex future'. Nothing could be planned or calculated in advance. If one distinguishes *future present* (the future that will become the present) from *present future* (the future as seen in the present), one can understand how the discrepancy between them – a discrepancy brought about by unanticipated future events which change the *present future* – needs to be resolved for decisions to be made and projects put in motion. Trust, therefore, 'is one of the ways of bringing this about'. It does so by reducing complexity in a way that allows people to 'prune the future so as to measure up to the present ... [i]t is an attempt to envisage the future but not to bring about future presents'.<sup>17</sup>

Where power is concerned, the problem of time takes on a somewhat different form. If it were not for the communicative system of power, it would be necessary for the threat of immediate violence to be continually present in order to bring about the 'avoidance alternative' that would keep the violence at bay and so achieve the desired result. The way that power is organized within the political system replaces and makes unnecessary the 'omnipresence of physical force'. This Luhmann refers to as 'temporalizing violence'. As he explains, '[p]hysical force is put in

place as the *beginning* of the system, which leads to the selection of rules, whose function, rationality and legitimacy render them independent of past, initial conditions'.<sup>18</sup> Simultaneously it is portrayed as a '*future event*' which can be avoided, if one stays on the right side of those rules. Both time horizons – the initial threat of physical force and the future event that will trigger that force – are transformed into effective regulation through secondary coding by means of law. The system of power allows for a regulated present which is no longer dependent upon the immediate threat of violence and, perhaps even more importantly, cannot be controlled through violence.

### The Historical and Sociological Context of *Trust* and *Power*

*Trust* and *Power* were originally published separately. The first edition of *Vertrauen (Trust)* appeared in 1968, followed by an extended edition in 1973. The book on *Macht (Power)* was published in 1975. Professor Tom Burns (d. 2001), at the University of Edinburgh, organized and arranged for the first translation of both books combined into one volume. The translation was undertaken by three Edinburgh postgraduate students with some knowledge of German. Both *Trust* and *Power* come from the pre-autopoietic period in Luhmann's work. Although Luhmann had already begun to elaborate his vision for a theory of society, his main theoretical terms gravitated around concepts like system, meaning (in the phenomenological sense), action, generalized symbolic media, and functionalism.

When Luhmann published the book on *Vertrauen*, the topic of trust was not much discussed within the wider social sciences.<sup>19</sup> The first edition of the book was written while Luhmann was working at the University of Münster Institute for Social Research, based in Dortmund. Founded in 1946 and focused on the economic restructuring of the Ruhr valley, it was seen as one of the key empirical and sociological institutes at that time in Germany. In the context of an empirical research environment and his growing theoretical ambition, Luhmann was struck by the 'statements about trust [that] are today still very far removed from being substantiated by methodologically valid means.'<sup>20</sup> The intention of the *Trust* book was therefore to progress with his theoretical project, but with an applied and empirical direction in mind.<sup>21</sup> The reader will notice that the book contains frequent references that point to further empirical research. Luhmann extended the book for the 1973 edition, which was the basis for the English translation in 1979. Luhmann's identification of trust in relation to complexity as being a social not just a psychological coping mechanism had an impact on several other influential sociologists in the Anglophone world.<sup>22</sup> As a sociological topic, trust has attracted increasing interest since the 1980s, but in that decade there were already signs

of Luhmann's declining interest in the subject, despite a minor essay,<sup>23</sup> as well as a chapter in the book *Social Systems*.<sup>24</sup> In Luhmann's late work of the 1990s the issue has almost completely vanished, beyond sporadic remarks and footnotes. However, despite this visible attenuation, it seems that Luhmann did not regard the topic as irrelevant; rather, the shift can be attributed to more general changes in his theory. In the early writings, trust was strongly bound to the problem of reduction of complexity within an action-theoretical framework. These two elements (action and reduction of complexity) subsequently faded into the background or were displaced by later theoretical developments – as, for instance, in the transition to an emphasis on communication and observation – and the term *trust* was never fully reworked to reflect these later developments. Luhmann's *Social Systems* (1984/1995), which set the benchmark for terms like communication and autopoiesis, sought to combine trust with the problem of double contingency, but no integration of the concept of trust can be found in his subsequent works.

The book on power had a different origin. At the time it was published, Luhmann was already being appointed professor at the University of Bielefeld. Since the early 1960s, a number of studies in the wider field of systems theory that analysed the political system and related phenomena had been published.<sup>25</sup> These publications had received considerable criticism, however, for their neglect of the role of power. It seemed that the control abilities associated with the term system would define power out of existence. Luhmann was well aware of this debate and referred to it in the posthumously published *Macht im System* (Power in the System).<sup>26</sup> It seemed quite clear to him that this direction of systems theory would ignore empirical research and would not fit with his knowledge of the political milieu. He was therefore actively looking for a way to remedy this deficit of systems theory, and attempted to address the problem in a second book published posthumously, called *Politische Soziologie* (Political Sociology).<sup>27</sup> The original outline for this account of the political system included a planned chapter on power, but it was never written, nor did Luhmann attempt to integrate the smaller book on the subject into the final manuscript of nearly 500 pages. It seems that both posthumous publications, while written during Luhmann's pre-autopoietic period, remained unpublished during his lifetime because he was unhappy with their theoretical conclusions and their inability to account adequately for this aspect of social reality.

Published in 1975, the German text on *Macht* represents a first culmination of these enormous efforts. The book can be seen as the first application of the newly developed or developing theory of symbolic generalized communication media; in particular, it reflects Luhmann's growing interest in social communication as the unit of social systems. He notes that this theoretical change represents the most severe break with older theories of power. Power should simply be seen as a personal property or

ability, but needs to be integrated into a theory that can account for a specific and meaningful steering of communication. The wealth of empirical research that informs this small publication is quite outstanding, covering topics including violence, conflict, the state, political parties, democracy, leadership, authority, terrorism and much more. In Luhmann's later writings communication became the defining paradigm of social systems, with power being one of the central topics that informed a range of later publications and culminating in the posthumous publication of *Politik der Gesellschaft (Politics as a Social System)*,<sup>28</sup> in which power, communication, medium and social system are the central theoretical terms.

### Functional Analysis and its Semantics

Luhmann's approach to empirical research bears little relation to the ethnographic studies, social surveys or observational reports that fill the pages of today's sociology journals. Both Luhmann's methods and the technical vocabulary he employs all flowed from the theoretical problems he set himself. While his eclectic research methods may not comply with the conventional, contemporary requirements for social science research, with its insistence on replication, testability and compliance with a recognized methodology, they are nevertheless empirical in that they rely on observations in the broadest sense of the term – both his observations and those derived from secondary sources. As we have mentioned, Luhmann does not subscribe to the view that sociological observers are in the business of capturing truth or reality. They rely, like all other observers of their environment, on a version of external reality that has been made possible through reduced complexity. Their observations will inevitably depend upon the presuppositions they bring with them about the nature of the phenomenon being observed. This will influence what they select to research and how they interpret their findings. The fact that other empirical sociologists accept these findings as valid does not mean that they correspond to some universal truth, just that they are true for those empirical sociologists. As Luhmann writes in *Power*, 'there are no independent foundations for empirical certainty'.<sup>29</sup> Reality is accessible only in a partial form through the selections of each observer, be they individuals or social systems. Scientifically validated research methods operate, like all prescriptive modes of observation, as filters which make selective aspects of reality accessible. As a general rule, the more rigorous the methods the narrower the aspect of reality that becomes accessible to the observer.

It is for this reason that Luhmann himself employs research methods that, as we have noted, are eclectic and multi-faceted, to say the very least. In these two books, he draws upon his own empirical research (with Renate Mayntz), his informal ethnographic observations obtained through his travels throughout the world, and his extensive knowledge of



both classical Greek and Roman works as well as European and American literature across a wide range of disciplines, both historical and contemporary. As regards empirical scientific work, he refers throughout the two books to studies by sociologists, political scientists, criminologists, anthropologists and social and developmental psychologists. When he is not engaging with the ideas of other theorists and contrasting them with his own theses, he is constantly using the evidence provided by other people's work as an assurance that what he is describing is not just a figment of his own speculations.

Turning to Luhmann's semantics, we have already noted how important it was in his eyes to generate terms and concepts relating to society that were essentially sociological, rather than using those already in existence in daily usage with their moral overtones. His objective was not to produce an esoteric language shared only by social theorists, but to develop a language which was able to manage the new ideas created by the dynamism of his new enlightenment and its unique way of observing the world. The hope was that these terms, once created, would eventually provide a common vocabulary to enable communication to take place between different understandings of the social world. If one takes the physical sciences as a model, this is not too outrageous an ambition. For example, genetics has successfully created around the concept of 'the gene' a whole new theoretical language to describe the process of evolution, a language that has found its way into the legal and political spheres, allowing laws to be drawn up and policies to be formulated. The same is true of the concepts generated by quantum physics. New scientific discoveries have brought about the need to generate new terms, to find a new theoretical language in order that these new ideas can be communicated and discussed. Many of them have subsequently found their way into common parlance to the extent that the new reality that they create is treated by the communications media as factual knowledge. In seeking to develop a new conceptual language fit for the purpose of describing how society operates, Luhmann was not, in scientific terms at least, preaching revolution. Yet in relation to mainstream sociology, this was combined with his rejection of the prevailing narrative tradition, derived for the most part from anthropology – the 'telling of stories' to account for the way that people think about and act towards one another in social situations. This narrative technique, of course, had the added advantage of creating the expectation that anyone who had acquired a high level of literacy should be able to understand sociological texts. Luhmann's writings tended to confound this expectation.

Luhmann turns his back on the narrative form conceived as a way of making life easy for the reader. In *Trust and Power*, as in his many other books and essays, the way he develops his solutions to the problems he himself poses, and defends those solutions against criticisms that he himself deploys, is much more in keeping with the philosophical tradi-