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## **NIKLAS LUHMANN'S SOCIAL SYSTEMS THEORY: THE ISSUE OF SUBSYSTEM AUTONOMY\*\*\***

### **Abstract**

Niklas Luhmann articulates the basic elements of his authentic theoretical position as criticism of, as he calls them, classical sociology or classical organisation theory. While within these orientations, (social) systems are mainly interpreted as centralised entities whose structures are stabilised by purpose determined at the top, Luhmann, in his general theory of social systems privileges internal differentiation in which subsystems autonomously define their purposes, making society more flexible and capable of responding to environmental challenges. In that sense, the main intention of this paper is the creation of cognitive interest for the notions of complexity and flexibility, i.e. for the issue of subsystem autonomy, as the important elements of Luhmann's general theory of social systems. Our premise is that the establishment of subsystem autonomy is not a matter of mere, a priori, theoretical and/or practical arbitrariness, nor does it mean an introduction into deconstruction of the system, but it represents a necessary

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step in the creation of successful responses of the social system to problems arising from the immense and dynamic complexity of its own environment. In other words, through the process of internal differentiation, by establishing subsystem autonomy, the social system increases its own complexity, i.e. ability to adjust to the environment. Thus, challenges arising from the environment are not transferred to the whole, but localised and processed in the appropriate, autonomous parts of the system. By so increasing its internal complexity, the system undeniably acquires the necessary flexibility, or capability for a faster and more efficient creation of alternative.

**Keywords:** social system, environment, complexity, flexibility, subsystem autonomy.

## **INTRODUCTION: SOCIOLOGY IN A THEORETICAL CRISIS**

Seeing himself as the successor (but also critic) of the theoretical orientation in sociology most prominently represented by Talcott Parsons, Niklas Luhmann took on a heavy burden of building a general social systems theory. By his own admission, at the very beginnings of his career at the Faculty of Sociology of the Bielefeld University, he cited as his only project: social theory; project duration: 30 years; expenditures: none. There is no doubt that Luhmann estimated all the aspects of his ambitious lifetime project quite realistically: from his early university work in 1969 until his death in 1998, he focused exclusively on developing a comprehensive, general social systems theory, publishing 53 books and several hundred theoretical articles along the way. Capping this incredible production is Luhmann's *opus magnum* - the book *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (translated to English as "Theory of Society") was published in 1997, shortly before his death. (Bechmann, Stehr 2002).

Luhmann constituted the basic elements of his own theoretical position through a critique of classical sociology, in its extreme version of being primarily an empirical science on society. Without diminishing its contribution to the overall expansion

of our knowledge about society by partial, specialised empirical research, Luhmann still contends that sociology as a distinct scientific discipline could not have been founded within this orientation<sup>1</sup>. Hence, already in the opening sentence of the *Foreword* to his 1984 book: *Social Systems: Fundamentals of General Theory*, he notes that “Sociology (...) is stuck in a theoretical crisis” (Luhmann 2001, 27). Such a general problematisation of the entire science on society refers mainly to the (majority) part of the sociological community that never actually overcame the issue of existence of a circular attitude to its own research subject. In other words, it is an epistemological paradox because the issue of circularity is immanent to any attempt to analyse or describe society, since any such attempt actually activates and changes social relations<sup>2</sup>. And insofar as research observes society, research is equally observed by society. Research becomes researched, observance observed. Any definition of the subject (society) implies that the defining as such – is one of the operations of that same subject (society). Attempts to overcome this epistemological paradox in classical sociology have relied mostly on the following premises: “that society consists of individuals and relations between them; that society is constituted by a consensus between individuals; that societies are territorially defined units; and thereby, that it is possible to observe societies, as groups of individuals situated in a particular territory, objectively from an outside point” (Lee 2000, 321).

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- 1) There is no doubt that the specialised branching of modern sociology was a kind of symmetrical response to the dynamics and development of contemporary societies. Classical sociology was characterised by the «orientation towards internal units» (Poggi 1965). However, the consequence of this development is the manifest deficit of awareness and care for the overall theoretical rooting which distanced sociology from its initial ideal of being “a general theory of society”.
  - 2) Anthony Giddens called this situation «ride in a dragon's carriage», alluding to the impossibility of thorough knowledge of the social world: “The reason for this is the circularity of social knowledge, which primarily influences the social world, rather than the world of nature. In the circumstances of modernity, the social world can never be a stable environment, in the sense of introducing new knowledge about its character and functioning. New knowledge (notions, theories, discoveries) does not make the social world more transparent, but changes its nature, sending it in a new direction. This phenomenon fundamentally impacts the quality of modernity which we called the ride in a dragon's carriage and concerns both socialised nature and social institutions themselves” (Giddens 1998, 147).

However, it is these premises, in Luhmann's opinion, that actually prevent an adequate definition of society as a research subject. Since the theory of society involves an endless self-observation of society, an infinite fractally structured auto-referentiality, it was practically impossible to establish this "external", solid point from which objective observation would be possible, i.e., from which the constitution of a general theory would be possible. This suppression of the general theoretical interest is, in Luhmann's view, an evident symptom of the profound crisis of science on society, a clear indicator that sociologists, by opting for a segmented approach, actually abandoned the quest (except, of course, Parsons<sup>3</sup>) for a comprehensive, systemic theory of society.

By highlighting the need to overcome this crisis in sociology, Luhmann opts for the opposite position and approach to building a general theory of society that would, in its demand for universality, have to appear as its own subject, simultaneously having to address old sociology dilemmas, such as – the individual and/or society, structure and/or action, consensus and/or conflict, evolution and/or stasis. Of course, it is self-evident that such a supertheory would have to be far more complex than anything hitherto assumed about science and society.

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- 3) Luhmann argues that "the only social theory currently in existence was elaborated by Talcott Parsons as a general theory of action systems. It may be put to a good use as codification of the classics' knowledge and as elaboration of the conceptual understanding of action by means of the contingency tables methodology" (Luhmann 2011, 21). Namely, as Milan Brdar (2009) reminds us in the Foreword to *Social Systems*, in the autumn of 1949, Parsons formed a team of associates within the Harvard Department of Social Relations, with an ambitious goal to build the basis for a new theoretical synthesis that would cover the whole field of social relations. Constituting such a general theory was contrary to the hitherto dominant *Chicago School of Sociology*, which strongly advocated a segmented approach in research of society (Parsons 2009). Parsons was mostly lambasted by neo-Marxist and left-oriented sociologists in general. One of them was Wright Mills who grudged him for turning away from practical issues with his "grand theory" and for locking himself up in an "ivory tower" and that such a theory, as consisting only of logical constructions, has no relevance whatsoever for empirical research. Luhmann, on the other hand, sums up Parsons' structural-functional theory as follows: "It is premised on social systems with certain structures and asks for functional successes that must follow for systems to be sustained. In so doing, the notion of function is mostly limited to internal successes, especially to sub-system contributions; the notion of function thus becomes an internal system category referring to the relation of the parts to the whole." (Luhmann 1998, 284).

On the other hand, as the successor of Parsons' orientation, Luhmann is aware that he must face the heavy legacy of functionalism, summed up in the belief that society is a stable system in which all parts are firmly integrated, that each part of the system has a clear function which contributes to integration, that each social system functions on the basis of consensus on the fundamental values and norms and that each deviation of system parts from their functions is interpreted as pathological. Although he does not even for a moment break the connection with the fundamental category of functionalism - the social system, Luhmann articulates the basic elements of his authentic sociological position exactly through the theoretical framework within which, by differentiation and subsystem autonomy, he resolves the issue of social change, an issue that has marked the sofar history of sociological theory. Within this theoretical scope, the (ostensibly inseparable) categories of system and purpose have a special role. Consequently, clarification of the relationship between the system and its purpose requires us, at least in broad strokes, to analyse the theoretical whole within which this relationship functions. Within that orientation, we particularly highlighted the concept of autonomy which is relatively less discernible in Luhmann's theory and therefore, in our opinion, must be specifically emphasized. Our main assumption therefore is that establishing subsystem autonomy is not a matter of sheer, a priori, theoretical and/or practical arbitrariness, but a necessary/inevitable step in the creation of successful responses of the social system to the challenges of the growing complexity of the environment. In the process of elaborating this basic position, we will more specifically consider: 1) social system as communication; 2) system-purpose relationship; 3) system-environment relationship, and 4) the process of internal system differentiation and the creation of subsystems' autonomy which, at the same time, entails a demand for cooperation between different parts of the system. In other words, through the process of differentiation and establishment of subsystem autonomy, the social system increases its own ability to adapt to the environment – environmental challenges are thus not transferred to the whole, but localised and processed in the appropriate, autonomous parts of the system. This increase in internal complexity enables to form alternatives more easily i.e. to relieve the highest levels from challenges which objectively do not

require the engagement of the entire system. The system structure thus acquires the necessary flexibility and subsystem autonomy becomes the real measure of this change.

The theoretical and practical relevance of this topic is more than explicit – one of the central issues of contemporary social and political practice is the articulation of increasingly rapid changes of complex social structures, and thus, in our opinion, Luhmann's systemic approach is also a welcome programme for the understanding of (and systematising) the complex modern world dynamics.

### **SOCIAL SYSTEM AS COMMUNICATION**

The concept of society is, no doubt, the most complex notion passed to us as the legacy of the social and philosophical theories of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth century. The pluralism of views of society comes from different schools of thought: from social contract theories, according to which society is created by “contract“ in which individuals in their relations “waive“ their freedoms and their natural rights in order to do away with the state of war of all against all and preserve their own existence; to different orientations in sociology that explained their subject - society, as a system similar to living organisms, in which general laws of organic development (biologism) apply, as a product of psychological relations between individuals (psychologism); as a system based on social action or the behaviour of individuals (behaviorism); as a self-regulating and self-sustaining system of interactions of different roles (functionalism); as the relationship between individual elements and the social system structure (structuralism); or as a permanent conflict of opposed classes (Marxism). These are different examples of reflections on the processes of constitution of modern societies rising from the ruins of the Christian-Medieval type of system, whose main differentiation principle was based on the unchangeable hierarchy of social classes i.e. on the belief that any occurrence has its place within God's plan. The rise of functional differentiation of modern societies thus triggered different approaches to their self-understanding (Đurić 2016).

Thus, it comes as no surprise that Luhmann legitimates the construction of the universal social system theory, along with the

critique of classical sociology, by classical questions – What is society? What is it made of? What operation produces and reproduces it? And he answers immediately. Society is a comprehensive social system incorporating all other social systems<sup>4</sup>. Society is a limited, self-contained, self-referential and self-sufficient system. In this sense, the self-sufficiency of a society should imply the institutionalisation of a sufficiently broad spectrum of components in order to respond to all important social requirements. This, of course, does not mean that all the roles of all members (people) are played out within society, but that a society must be able to respond to elementary requirements of its members (people), at different stages of the life cycle. However, Luhmann argues that society consists not of people (*sic!*)<sup>5</sup>, but of - communication: “The basic process of social systems that produces elements systems consist of in these circumstances can only be communication” (Luhmann 2001, 205). This does not mean that society should in the process of deconstruction be traced back to some “zero point” nor does it answer the question about morphogenesis or the primordial, real nature of society. Namely, the communication/society relationship should also be understood as a simultaneous, continuous, dual one – society is not possible without communication, but communication is not possible without society either<sup>6</sup>.

- 4) Evident here is Luhmann's parallelism with Parsons' definition of society: “Essential for the notion of society is not that it should not in some way be empirically independent compared to other societies, but only that it should *contain all* (italics added) structural and functional prerequisites of an independent system“ (Parsons 2009, 70). Both of them, however, follow Aristotle who, in the opening sentences of *Politics* defines a polis as a community which incorporates all others: “Since we see that every city is a community and that every community is established with a view to some good (for mankind always act in order to obtain that which they think good), it is evident that all [communities] aim at some good, but the community which is the highest of all and which embraces all the rest aims at the highest of all [goods]. And it is called the state or political community” (Aristotle 1988, 1).
- 5) More on Luhmann's posthumanism in: “Niklas Luhmann and Posthuman Modernity” (Lovasz 2018, 1 – 17).
- 6) But Luhmann does not understand communication as information transmitted from sender to recipient. He sees transmission as a metaphor implying the idea of possession and suggesting that the sender loses information while the recipient acquires it. By contrast, Luhmann defines communication as „the synthesis of three selections, as a unity of information, utterance and understanding” (Luhmann 2001, 215). Communication is considered realised understanding of the information is acknowledged.

Society is thus (self-) produced by communication. Thus, we must understand any change in the way in way of production of communication as change in the production of society<sup>7</sup>. If we accept that assumption, it is self-evident that the boundaries of communication are at the same time the boundaries of society. Society embraces all things social in itself without knowing the social environment: “Because society as a comprehensive social system does not know social systems outside its boundaries. It is thus impossible to observe from the outside” (Luhmann 2011, 79).

On the other hand, any observation of the environment implies internal activity based on differentiation, i.e. self-observation and self-description, which materialises the issues of self, of one’s own identity. Both self-observation and self-description are communication operations which “enable to communicate in society, though not *with* society, but *about* society” (Luhmann 2011, 761). In so doing, the process of self-description sharply delimits the social system from the environment.<sup>8</sup>

Differentiation from the environment is the condition both for system constitution and survival. Maintaining the boundary also means maintaining the system. On the other hand, the environment has an extremely relative, unstable status – “it is a different one for each system” (Luhmann 2001, 55), because each system by its constitution becomes distinct from its environment. The operation of distinction is based on the reduction of complexity (for example: system = environment – n), or, on the self-description of its own

- 7) This is evident even in a superficial analysis of the link between a particular communication media and the corresponding society type: namely, verbal communication creates tribal societies, writing enables the creation of empires, printing technology the creation of nation-states, while the electronic/satellite communication becomes the prerequisite of global society which “so to speak, inflates or shrinks, depending on how communication is realised“ (Luhmann 2011, 71).
- 8) In that sense, a system (including social) will denote “any serious being that is maintained identical partly on the basis of its own order and partly based on external circumstances, in a completely complex, variable environment that cannot be fully mastered” (Luhmann 1998, 5). Hence, systems must be understood as identities maintained in a complex and variable environment by operation of distinction between the interior and the exterior. Here we should be reminded of Parsons’ view that “at a very general theoretical level, there is no difference between processes sustaining a system and those changing it. The difference lies in the intensity, layout and organisation of the «elemental» parts of certain processes and the state of structures they impact” (Parsons 1988, 50).



purpose. However, purpose-setting is not some arbitrary enterprise, but a result of processes unfolding within the system itself and thus it deserves to be discussed separately.

## SYSTEM AND PURPOSE

In system theory, the concept of purpose denotes those consequences, or a set of consequences which should justify action. At the same time, "...action should be understood as any meaningful and outward-oriented effective human behaviour" (Luhmann 1998, 5). An action system is a set of concrete actions by one or more individuals, which is limited to an environment by meaningful relations between these actions. That is, "immanent to the action system is that this action is normatively oriented" (Parsons 2009, 86). This actualises the issue of order, while the issue of the nature of integration of stabilised systems of social interaction is reduced to a synthesis of motivation and normative cultural standards, made up of value orientation patterns. This notion of agency<sup>9</sup> understands the purpose, aim, as a constituent part of the action structure, as the part which gives the whole meaning and justification. For an actor, purpose is both the reason and a benchmark of his action.

Without arguing with this understanding, Luhmann just transfers the concept of purpose from the action theory to the system theory. The reason is simple and evident: there is no system without purpose. "Purposelessness is", as noted by Norbert Wiener, "by its nature ephemeral" (Wiener 1973, 57). That is why the focus to purpose within the system is one of the pivotal points of Luhmann's

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9) "The theory of action is the conceptual scheme for the analysis of behaviour of living organisms. Behaviour is understood as oriented toward the achievement of aims (*or purposes, author's note*) in situations, through normatively oriented energy consumptions. There are four points to note in this conceptualisation of behaviour: (1) behaviour is oriented at the achievement of purposes or goals or other anticipated conditions; (2) it happens in a situation; (3) it is normatively regulated, and (4) it implies energy consumption, effort or "motivation" (which, more or less, can be organised independently from involvement in action). (...) If behaviour can be analysed in this way, and if we analyse it, we call it action; but, in order to call it that, we must analyse it from the standpoint of anticipated conditions that we direct it to, situation in which it unfolds, normative regulation (for example, intelligence) of behaviour and energy consumption, or the motivation involved. Therefore, action is behaviour that are reducible to these elements" (Parsons 2009, 605 - 606).

research. On the other hand, in organisation theory<sup>10</sup> the sensemaking approach has been particularly firmly rooted. It is a generally accepted view that the only rational system is an organised one, which fulfils its purpose. Purpose-setting and subordinating means to the purpose thus always meant the narrowing of the value horizon of action itself, reducing it to the level of a system instrument.

This was not much of a problem in earlier periods of stable conceptual configurations. However, today we know that no purpose and no goal can any longer claim the right to absolute truthfulness and universal validity<sup>11</sup>. In the overall plurality of narratives, none still holds the status of the privileged conflux of truth. Totality is replaced by separate elements that cannot aspire to interpretation of the whole. The emphasis is on the perspective from which a particular phenomenon is analysed and not on some stable, objective truth. The constancy of purposes has thus become only a system-relative constant that does not exclude the possibility of its own change. As purposes are no longer invariable, they assume the status of the relative view to which the acting subject is oriented<sup>12</sup>.

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10) On how Luhmann's social systems theory was ignored by authors from the organisation theory field, see more in: "Bright, Excellent, Ignored: The Contribution of Luhmann's System Theory and Its Problem of Non-Connectivity to Academic Management Research" (Baralou, Wolf et. Meissner 2012, 289 – 308).

11) That was also noted by Jean-Francois Luotard in his *Postmodern State*: "the narrative function loses its functors (factors), superheroes, great dangers, great peripeties and a great goal" (Luotard 1988, 6). However, the overall disintegration of meta-narratives does not at the same time mean the disintegration of social ties. Luotard keeps his optimism: "The man himself is small, but he is not isolated, he is captured by a set of relations that are more complex and more mobile than ever. Whether young or old, man or woman, rich or poor, he is always placed on the "nodes" of communication circuits, no matter how small they are. Rather, it should be said: placed in spots through which various messages pass" (Luotard 1988, 29). This interplay of seemingly isolated individuals creates elastic communication networks that experience shifts with each new information item and message. In this sense, a forcible (and full) identification with some meta-narrative is in fact no longer possible.

12) Criticising the ontological tradition, Luhmann frees the concept of purpose from its naturalistic-teleological connotations (purpose as something *naturally given, true, binding constant*, etc.). Purpose is no longer the ultimate cause and criterion for the selection of adequate means, or, a rational cause of individuals' joint action, but becomes subject to subjective selection. This, of course, opens up a new dimension of complexity because, if one subject can choose its own purpose – then so can others. This also renders useless generally formulated purposes which should serve

This differentiation and destabilisation of action structure gives rise to the differentiation of the theory of action itself. In the old tradition, systems were always defined as wholes, consisting of parts but they were more than a sum of their parts (a good example are social contract theories). In that sense, if we project a purpose/means scheme to this concept of the system, we come very close to considering the whole as the system purpose, while the means would be its parts. A particular combination of means (organisation), results in something that is more than a sum of its parts – the fulfilment of purpose.

The whole/parts scheme is a static model for a complex state of affairs; by contrast, the purpose/means scheme is based on the dynamic causal action model. This is how we arrive at the thesis characteristic of organisation theories: equating the purpose/means principle with the whole/parts scheme prevails as the main principle. Accordingly, the hierarchical order of the system is the order of purpose and means. Within this order, purposes dominate over means, that is, the top of the system represents purpose and lower levels the means for its achievement. The highest instance determines the system purpose. Anything below it are the means to achieve the goal so defined<sup>13</sup>. After all, this defragmentation was also the basis for the industrial division of labour. Namely, the industrial division of labor was only possible between different means and not between purpose and means because the decision on the purpose could not be made without prior knowledge of possible means. The hierarchy based on the purpose/means scheme is based on the assumption that functional division of work only makes sense as a horizontal separation of different sub-tasks. This is why the still prevailing notion of hierarchy views it as generalisation, an ascent from concrete, specialised toward general tasks or decision-making situations.

On the face of it, this does not seem problematic. Only the top of the system can legitimately communicate with the environ-

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to create concrete programmes of action (for example, political party ideologies). In this sense, they cease to function as a framework for the development and compliance with the (pre-) defined purpose.

- 13) In the classical organisation theory, the purpose always programmes possible means. In this process of instrumentalisation, all undesirable or unintended (in sum, redundant) aspects of these means are neutralised.

ment – all the other parts act on behalf of the top. But the weakness of this model is exactly in such a pre-stabilised situation. Namely, system structures have to be problematic, they must have internal tension, in order to collect problems from the environment and integrate them in the system. This is especially important in large systems. Otherwise, suppressed problems emerge elsewhere, in a modified form. Thus, a need arises for autonomous responses by certain parts of the structure, while the top of the system for its part responds by introducing additional controls, monitoring of loyalty, etc. This is immediately followed by the necessity for additional coordination, which should address the issue of system inefficiency. In the theory of action, this may be understandable and justified. However, in the system theory, it is an unmistakeable sign of centralisation.

The classical organisation theory interprets the system as a whole consisting of parts, i.e. the whole as the purpose and the parts as the means. It also implies that the internal relationship materialises as a hierarchical organisation of positions with command relations. This, however, creates an extremely simplistic picture of closed organisational structure. And that's exactly what raises Luhmann's doubts. For, excessive simplicity must be suspicious. At this point, it was time to dethrone the notion of purpose and to include it as a variable with specific functions in a more comprehensive theory of organised social systems.

## SYSTEM AND ENVIRONMENT

And in this more comprehensive social systems theory, the central paradigm is the relationship between the system and the environment<sup>14</sup>. At the root of social systems is not a “subject” but – the environment. “The final relation of all functional analyses is in the difference of the system and the environment“ (Luhmann 2001, 252). However, it should be immediately stressed that the notion of environment is not just the balance, or what-is-not-sys-

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14) The system-environment relationship is also characteristic for cybernetics. The fascination with the issue of (system) constancy in an extremely complex, variable setting (environment), as well as the attempt to explain the invariable states of variables by communication, brings cybernetics and sociological functionalism into an area of surprising closeness.

tem. "On the contrary, the relationship with the environment is constitutive for the system construction, (...) the environment is the premise for system identity since identity is possible only through differentiation" (Luhmann 2001, 252). "In this way, the system-environment relationship is not defined from any absolute perspective, but is narrowed down to a relative, variable and yet "objective" (self-) perception operation from the perspective of the pre-set system identity<sup>15</sup>. Each system thereby actually acquires a different environment.

On the other hand, every system is linked to its environment by selective relations that reduce its complexity; thus, the whole environment can never be relevant for the system, the system can never communicate with all the events in its environment. In principle, the system simplifies its position vis-à-vis the environment by substituting the objective situation by its own perspective, operation of self-description. In other words, system action is not determined by the objective reality, but by its own, subjective idea of reality. External system relations are not ignored, but system identity is primarily viewed as a set of internal relations, finalised in the consensus on system purpose or aim. This operation reconfirms areas of varying complexity. Asymmetry is evident: the environment is always more complex than any system, because more events are possible in it than in the system itself. Compared to the environment, the system excludes at least one, but usually many more possibilities, reducing the complexity of the environment and thereby creating an order with fewer possibilities in which system actors can more easily orient their own action.

However, this asymmetry simultaneously handicaps the system, making it incapable to adequately respond to unplanned events in its environment. In the perspective of continuous intensification/acceleration of global communication, the immense complexity of the environment appears as a growing array of (un-) expected challenges that must be evaluated in a way that system action can be organised and coordinated. For every system seeking to maintain its own identity, to survive, the extreme complexity of the environment

15) "In the plane of *reflection*, the system defines its own identity that differs from everything else. A decline in complexity gains its purest, most abstract form here; identity as the distinction from everything else is, in essence, nothing else but the definition and localisation of the decline in complexity" (Luhmann 2001, 261).

is always posed as a problem, as a series of challenges requiring response. The question which logically follows is – which elements and resources would the system have to mobilise and keep ready in order to be constantly able to adequately respond to environmental challenges? But, no system can be open to all possible options all the time. The system tries to compensate for this deficit, this latent inability to adequately respond to environmental contingencies, by stabilising selection criteria, by “planning” to which problems it will respond and in what way. Of course, the system’s tendency to stabilise the selection criteria is quite understandable, but this intention should not rely on the prescribed, “predictable” processes, which essentially block possible alternatives. A pre-selected model of response to environmental challenges is characterised by low flexibility and a low integrative capacity. In this way, the system is prevented from maintaining a high level of sensibility, i.e. self-correction. In other words, any rational projection of future conditions, any “planning” is only an attempt with a highly uncertain outcome, since the complexity of the environment is virtually unlimited, so any long-term prediction is impossible.<sup>16</sup>

### INTERNAL SYSTEM DIFFERENTIATION

Therefore, and in order to be able to address these problems at all, the system must, within its limits, develop certain forms of autonomy, consisting in the ability of system parts to process problems selectively. Thus, the only remaining effective strategy is the strategy of internal system differentiation, or subsystem creation<sup>17</sup>. “Subsystem creation”, Niklas Luhmann argues, “means

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16) This is convincingly attested by the history of socialist states with their so-called “planned economy”. It turned out that the intensification of central planning is essentially directly proportionate to the increase in inflexibility, rigidity and therefore also system inefficiency.

17) “The development of society is often described as progress towards a growing differentiation of the system. This view is correct, but needs clarifying. It would be difficult to compare all kinds of societies by the degree of their differentiation, assuming a common measurement; societies are too heterogeneous because they use different forms of differentiation. Degrees of differentiation and related complexities are produced and mediated by forms of differentiation and these forms of differentiation differ in the way in which they establish internal boundaries between the subsystem and internal environments“(Luhmann 1977, 32). This brings us to an apparently paradoxical situation: for the system to preserve its own identity, it

improving the ability to adapt which is usually critical for survival; it is thus possible to localise harmful environmental impacts and stop them in system parts; they are not transferred further to other parts, or to the whole, because due to the partial independence of parts, there is only a transfer of impacts that are functionally meaningful or overstep a particular threshold of interference and are therefore rare in a given environment” (Luhmann 1998, 131). In this way, the system gains time. Internal differentiation enables quick adjustment, i.e. increased system flexibility, because it is not necessary to load, engage the whole system to increase the number of possible reactions.

By this internal differentiation, the system is able to process much more environmental complexities than in the case of a centralised, undifferentiated system. However, every part of the system processing a certain aspect of environmental complexity is premised on specific purposes, goals, which serve as its framework. This framework must be defined and, at the same time, undefined: defined – in order to, as a premise of decision-making, point to the choice of problems to which it then responds; undefined – so that it can absorb as much environmental complexity and variability as possible without structure change. This simply means that the system is not fully planned in detail, but only to a certain extent. In this way, the system becomes capable of transforming external complexity into internal complexity relatively efficiently and by doing so, strengthen its own boundaries. “Internal differentiation claims an additional right to external boundaries and strengthens them. Internal differentiations converge at external boundaries and can only be maintained if external boundaries keep the external environment away. The difference from the environment will be amplified once more if the internal differentiation scheme is selected autonomously<sup>18</sup>, and not relative to the environmental realities” (Luhmann 2001, 271).

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must be differentiated from the environment; on the other hand, in order to respond to the variable challenges from the environment, the system must introduce certain environmental elements into its own structure. Thus we come to the internal differentiation of the subsystem.

- 18) Namely, insofar as the system can be independent from the environment through self-referentially established patterns of differentiation, it can also autonomously implement differentiation processes. Paradoxical as it seems at first glance, the system becomes more sensitive to its own environment in this way.

It is therefore, understandable that each of these different, autonomous system levels must have its own purposes, goals. The notion of system rationality thus must necessarily be transferred from centralised rationality to a more complex, more comprehensive form. This also sets the limits of effectiveness of each level created by these goals. The change profoundly alters what we implied by system rationality: “The central theses of the classical organisation science, interpretation of the system a whole comprised of parts, interpretation of the whole as the purpose and of the parts as means and the thought that the final relationship abstracted to indefiniteness must be concretised by a hierarchical organisation of positions with command relations, in their distinct simplicity provide the picture of a closed organisational structure“ (Luhmann 1998, 61). Namely, the tradition of the Western way of thinking has for a long time understood that rational choice within one system can only be the choice of means for the achievement of some unique goal, rather than the choice of different goals. The starting point of this belief was based on the view that the system is a whole consisting of parts but that it is also always more than the simple sum of its parts. Accordingly, the operation of defining the goal, purpose of a system always departed from the idea that this goal is in fact unachievable for its individual parts.

However, due to the increasingly rapid and intense changes in the environment/world<sup>19</sup>, the constancy of goals becomes questionable, without excluding the possibility of changing (and decomposing) the very same goals or purposes. Thus, the category of purpose, goal, loses the significance of the symbol of the unique system, introducing the possibility of setting multiple different goals or purposes at sub-system level. In this way, the production of possible orders within the system is achieved, or, the system-environment relationship is multiplied – each of the differentiated subsystems views other subsystems as its own environment, resulting in a general increase in system flexibility. This internal transformation makes possible to overcome the simple and sharp binary schematism of system/environment (us/them, friend/

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19) Despite the increasing pace of change, what remains unchanged is the fact that these are areas of different complexity; the environment is always more complex than any system; more conditions and more events are always possible in the environment than in any other system.



enemy, etc.), which ultimately creates conditions for strengthening the capacity of the social system in the process of addressing new and more complex challenges.

## CONCLUSION

Starting from the thesis that the specificity of the facts of social life, or, the specific circularity of knowledge about society contributes to the elusiveness of that same society, Luhmann, reconstructs the very way of defining the subject of sociology: he postulates society as a comprehensive system which incorporates all other social systems. In that sense, society is a closed autopoietic system constantly self-produced by communication. At the same time, communication as the basic autopoietic operation determines the boundaries of society and its environment. And it is precisely in the relationship between the social system and its environment that the most important relations meet, influencing in turn the condition of the social system: namely, the imperative of any system is to affirm itself by overcoming the environmental complexities. At this point, Luhmann distinguishes two possible strategies of any social system – a) centralising the system and strengthening its structure that props it forward, defined purpose at the top, and b) internal differentiation of the system in which subsystem levels autonomously define their own purposes and thus assume the task of resolving challenges from the environment. Needless to emphasize, strategy „b“, in Luhmann's opinion, produces far more balanced and developed social systems and is also extremely relevant in the context of social practice.

This is why our intention in this paper has been to form, from the perspective of system theory, a cognitive interest in the notion of subsystem autonomy, in order to emphasize internal differentiation as a key process that enables society to overcome problems arising from the indefinite and dynamic complexity of its own environment. These problems introduced the issue of society's capacity to adequately respond to growing challenges within the classical understanding of the whole and parts on the agenda of modern social theory, as well as political practice. Attempts to resolve these issues by stabilising the system by strengthening centralisation had clear consequences – systems would become

torpid and inflexible, devoid of any potential for social learning and (self-) correction. Because of this, we focused our attention in a different direction – toward a model of internal differentiation and development of the autonomy of system elements.

The idea of a social system, as a structural whole in which the action of integral elements has, as its sole purpose, the survival of the system thus becomes, in the circumstances of global acceleration, simply outdated and obsolete. This is why Luhmann analyses the notion of purpose from the perspective of system elements, rather than the whole system (like the classical functionalist position). This analysis makes obvious the issue of the system flexibility deficit in relation to an extremely variable environment. Since, in systems in which only the top of the organisation defines its own purpose (while the elements are limited to internal success of maintaining the systems), any problem from the environment transferred through the whole structure heavily burdens the system, making it inefficient and slow.

This becomes particularly evident with the intensification of relations on the global scale and the fact that social systems face growing complexity. The system's ability to remain identical in a complex and variable environment is thus threatened by its own structure – centralised organisations gradually lose capacity to organise the production of adequate alternatives. Attempts to solve this problem by prediction and planning possible challenges and model responses have proved clearly inferior. Another way to respond to the growing complexity of the environment was the model of differentiated systems' autonomy. This model (in practical policy materialised as a subsidiarity principle) implies the competences of lower system structures for some decision-making. As we already noted, it would be a way to bring the problem-solving level closer to the level at which they arise.

However, in his theory, Luhmann goes a step further in order to radicalise the whole-parts relationship, or to question the level at which purposes are defined. This means that it would be necessary to abandon the tradition of classical functionalism which would imply that the rational choice, at sub-system level, could only be the choice of means for the achievement of a purpose and not the choice of the purpose itself. By operation of internal system dif-

ferentiation, sub-systems acquire autonomy which also includes own purposes. Thus, new complexity in the system is released – differentiated subsystems become able to communicate with environmental challenges and produce alternatives themselves, without engaging and endangering the entire structure.

In this way, the development of autonomy within a particular system is not a matter of some superficial “political aesthetics“, nor is internal complexity established in this way worthy by itself. On the contrary, we believe that it logically results from the dynamics of the system-environment relationship. The system must adapt and become flexible through the process of differentiation, while at the same time maintaining the principle of synthesis, or its own identity. The optimal system complexity established in this way becomes, in our opinion, while at the same time preserving the principle of synthesis, or its own identity. The optimal system complexity established in this way becomes, in our opinion, an assumption of the successful survival in a complex and dynamic environment of the globalised world.

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