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## The context of Niklas Luhmann's theory

### Santrauka

*Šiuolaikinė kontinentinė socialinė mintis plėtoja socialinę teoriją, pagrįstą fenomenologinėmis žmogaus veiksmo ir patyrimo sąvokomis. Šios teorijos pagrindas yra laiko sąvokos ir mokslo bei teorinio mąstymo pertvarkymas. Siekiama išvengti prielaidos, kad teorijos ir teoretikai turi ekstra-laikinę ir ekstra-socialinę pranašumo laikyseną, kuriai nedaro poveikio socialiniai pokyčiai, sąlygos, istorinis laikotarpis, supratimo būdai ir vertybiniai interesai. Teorinis ir mokslinis mąstymas yra vidinio-socialinio pobūdžio reiškiny, o dėl šios priežasties - laikinis, todėl jį svarbu nagrinėti pasitelkiant žmonių veiksmus visuomenėje ir istorijoje. Be to, svarbu kelti "paskutiniojo" interpretatoriaus ir atrankos subjekto klausimus. Kaip turime suprasti subjektą, kuris interpretuoja, atranka ir susieja socialinius veiksmus ir reiškinius? Šiame straipsnyje plačiau nagrinėjama Niklaso Luhmanno teorinė problematika.*

### Introduction

More recent continental thought is developing a social theory based on phenomenological concepts of human action and experience. At the base of this theory there is the reevaluation of the concept of time and the function of science and theoretical thought. It attempts to escape the assumption that theories and theoreticians have an extra-temporal and extra-social vantage point unaffected by social change, conditions, historical period, modes of perception and valuative interests. Theoretical and scientific thought is inner-worldly, inner-social and hence temporal and must be understood in terms of human action within society and history. Furthermore, a question of the last interpreter and the subject of selectivity must be raised. How are we to conceive of the subject who interprets, selects and correlates social actions and phenomena? It too must be understood in inner-social, temporal terms. To better understand this theory it is necessary to sketch the series of problems which led to its formulation. Although there are many writers who have contributed to the development of the contemporary continental social thought, only the topics relevant for the framing of Luhmann's thinking will be introduced.

### Theoretical Thought and the last interpreter

Habermas has pointed out that there is no demonstrable correspondence between an area of experience and theoretical systems. The empirical phenomena are external to theories and the conjunction between them has no necessity. The conjunction requires a conjoiner who comes with a much broader understanding than a theory and its selected empirical factors. The conjoiner therefore has a particular interest in the theory and the empirical events selected by him to either validate or invalidate the theory. Hence an application of a theory to the empirical phenomena does not yield pure objectivity, but an objectivity from a viewpoint of interest. This leads to a second consideration. The scientist, the theorizing subject is part of the area of investigation. The social scientist does not deal with unqualified data, since the very process of social explanation is part of the social process and hence it qualifies and changes the data of subsequent investigations. The social scientist and his social theory are a part of the social process and, while being influenced by the process, they in turn influence

the social process. With regard to the question of the last interpreter this means that the interpreter cannot become a non-participating and non-effective observer.

Another set of problems confronting us consists of the invalidity of approaches to society which assume a priori stance concerning the proper objective domain of social sciences to which all other domains must be reduced. This is known as reductionism. A science cannot construct an a priori method i.e. positivistic, and reduce the subject matter to the requirements of the method without falsifying or changing the subject matter. Furthermore, where the subject matter of the theory is preformed by the theory and changes in terms of this preformation, then the application of the theory cannot be called objective. The subject matter cannot be observed without changing the subject matter nor can an a priori theory or method be introduced without becoming part of the changing subject matter, i.e. society. And if the theory is based on a broader social understanding and is limited due to its a priori methodology, then it cannot propose to deal with the entire social fabric and understanding. The required correspondence between the theoretical point of departure and its object of explanation are parts of the social process to which the sociological theorist and researcher belong.

This points to a domain of experience which is accumulated pre-scientifically through the history of living society where the distinction between the objective-subjective has not yet arisen. This fundamental social experience as a whole directs the very theories which emerge and articulate the traditionally transmitted modes of understanding and functioning and are in turn themselves subsumed in the social process as one among many modes of inner-social understanding and functioning. Thus the understanding of social and historical laws is a limited temporal and social event based on a pre-understanding of the socially transmitted experiences.

Moreover, such a pre-understanding is a co-shaper of the historical orientation of the

society although such an orientation is already a reflected, selected and interpreted and includes the very subject of interpretation and reflection. But this requires the understanding of the process of selectivity and reflection internal to the social and historical process. Such an understanding will be provided in the subsequent discussion of Luhmann's notion of time of activity and the temporal reflex.

From what has been said so far it can be concluded that the subject or the last interpreter, who constructs theories, correlates then to social phenomena and evaluates such a correlation, cannot be investigated by one of the empirical sciences; were this the case, then the very subject of selectivity and interpretation would be selected as an object of another subject of selectivity and interpretation. Of course the answer could be that since the subject of selectivity cannot be an object of one of the sciences, then it can be disregarded as scientifically irrelevant. Language can take over the role of the process of selectivity and correlation. Yet such an answer is inadequate since language must also become an object of one of the objective sciences. But if language is assumedly the very process of selectivity, then it cannot be explicated by any of the objective or behavioral sciences. After all, if language is the very process of selectivity, correlation of theories to facts and interpretation, then all theories may be parts of language, but no theory can assume language to be its object. In other words, if language expresses the social and historical process and since all theories and sciences are internal to the social process, then none of the theories or sciences can transcend the social process and language to survey them from without. Neither the last interpreter nor language can be an object of any of the sciences selected by the subject or language.

Beside the problems of the last interpreter, we are also confronted with the problem of value-free science. A mere recognition of rational purpose in science introduces an unavoidable valuation of human behavior in terms of a "future Ideal" toward which such behavior ought to be oriented. There is an implicit se-

lectivity of behavior in terms of better or worse. Of course the answer to this is that the current sciences did not yet achieve a value free stance, yet a future community of objective researchers will achieve objective knowledge without any valuation. But this is historicism and teleology which are not warranted on any objective grounds. Scientific theory and methodology cannot introduce teleology in its structure: it must assume such a teleology on non-scientific, non-objective grounds. Since scientific objective theory requires the selectivity of proper habits of observation in order to achieve its rationalized and logical universe, then it must assume a teleology. The teleology provides an ideal criterion used to distinguish between good and bad habits of observation and correct and incorrect behavior. But this reduces the last interpreter to an object of a particular science which assumes an evaluative capacity of the interpreter. Yet, as was suggested above, the last interpreter cannot become an object of any particular theory. Hence any theoretical selectivity of correct and incorrect behavior assumes a valuation which the very theory purports to avoid.

Human experience and activity, in contrast to strictly observed behavior, cannot be understood without valuation and orientation. Even if one were to assume an orientation of activity as value free, in one's explanations of such an activity one presents "good reasons" for such an activity. But this is ideal "purpose rationality". It assumes ideal criteria of selectivity by which to decide which of the reasons are "good reasons" and an implicit future value to guide behavior orientation. Moreover, the process of selectivity assumes value horizons which favour "purpose rationality" instead of, for instance, aesthetic self expression as more valuable for life and understanding. Such a favouring is not innocent in the case of social sciences. The only way that a theory can be free from social ideologies if it is excluded from practical application. But as already noted, in social theory the theorizing subject is an integral part of the social process and hence his theorizing affects others. If his theorizing se-

lects certain social factors or areas as more basic, more explanatory and hence more valuable, then there is a danger of splitting society into functions in accordance with their prescribed degree of value. This ultimately leads to a division between the rulers and the ruled.

The series of problems enunciated above show that the "last interpreter" of selectivity and valuation, although assumed by sciences, cannot become a domain of investigation of any one science. Moreover, the assumed process of selectivity of empirical data and their correlation to the theoretical structures is neither identical with the data nor the theory. Yet such a process is where valuation, temporal orientation and correlation of data in time is taking place. The "last interpreter" is inner-social and consequently within the temporal process of socio-historical development. The question then is: how are we to understand the temporal, inner-social last interpreter within the temporal process of society? Without such an understanding we shall be reduced either to the metaphysical assumptions that there are socially privileged occurrences called theories and theoreticians occupying an extra-social and extra-temporal position unaffected by the social process, or to the above mentioned problems of understanding the last interpreter. The task then is to carefully outline an understanding and function of the last interpreter.

### **Temporal structure of experience and activity**

If social life is based on human experience and activity, then it is essential to understand the structures of such activity. Moreover, if activity and experience are temporal, then their temporal structures must also be delimited. There is a long tradition of thought proclaiming that time is linear flow of events in a causal succession. Although this tradition is still habitually assumed in many areas of human endeavor, it has been challenged by the best thinkers of the twentieth century. The problem of time, at least with respect to human experience and activity, is the following: if activity time

is linear, then all past activities are no longer present and the future activities are not yet present and hence they can have no influence on our present activities. After all, past is no more and future is not yet. Of course it could be replied that the past is in our memory and the future is in our expectations; but if memory and expectation are functions of a subject living here and now, then such functions are here and now and cannot "go beyond" their temporal location. Real functions, be they mental or physical, are locked in their temporal moment. A theory of action, based on such a linear time conception is incomprehensible. The current action is all that is present; the previous actions are remembered actions, i.e. in memory and the future actions are in expectation: hence any understanding of action's orientation would consist of memories and expectations. but since such memories and expectations are also present functions, then the temporal orientation of activity is reduced to a presently occurring subjective functions. The linear theory of time is thus totally inadequate for the understanding of human activity since such an activity is oriented temporally and assumes both present and future as field of that orientation.

It must be insisted that the objections to linear time conception do not invalidate its utility for sciences; they simply point out that linear time must be understood in a broader context. Such a context has been delimited by elucidations of the temporal structures of experience and action, and Luhmann's work complement and deepen these elucidations at the level of social theory. An analysis of human action and experience shows that they occur within a specific time-context. Whatever is experienced now sinks into a horizon which is not yet in the past but belongs to the present activity and experience. For example in the activity of speaking and listening, the entire statement or the entire speech is present. What has been said is a horizon of what is being said; the horizon is part of the understanding of the presently spoken words and sentences Hence the present is not a point on a geometrical line

but a presence comprised of horizons. It is still the same speech which is being spoken and heard. The past as such arises only when the present and its horizons are interrupted. Then we ask: "What did the person just say?" and orient ourselves deliberately to the past. In brief, memory consciousness is distinct from horizon-consciousness.

The present also includes a future horizon of expectations of relevant possibilities providing an orientation for experience and activity. The relevant possibilities, belonging to the present speaking, are part of the speech in the mode of future horizon. The past horizon does not vanish into oblivion since it is required and retained for the comprehension of the future horizon. The present is thus a temporal field consisting of active past and future horizons constituting a field of orientations of human action and experience. Hence each activity occurs within a temporal field where the coming future and retained past are co-present and are manifest in the activity. What has been said in the speech continues to be present for the understanding of what is being said and is about to be said. Moreover, what is about to be said is a condition for the understanding of what is and was said. Time of action and experience is a field. If human actions are based on temporal field then humans are not only temporal but also historical beings. This means that through actions humans make their history and since history arises through human action, then the very being of human is the history which she makes. But such a history is understandable only on the grounds of temporal field of action. This suggests that human conception of nature and its orientation plays differing roles at different historical times. But this means that what we call nature, and its assumed linear time, arises only as one class of phenomena within the temporal field of action. Before we can raise the theoretical question of natural time, we have already assumed the temporal field of action. Hence the orientation of the theoretical, linear time, if it is to make any sense as oriented time, must function within the understanding of temporal field understanding.

This means furthermore that although we may analyze natural facts, their properties and temporal orientations, we shall discover that facts function and assume orientation within a context of significations. This suggests that each natural and historical event functions within the temporal field whose horizons are specified by significative implications of such events. Thus historical events are not connected causally but significatively. Past events appear for what they are in terms of their significative implications for the present and future. What is significant for human action continues not in some random heap of facts stored in some memory hut in folklore, stories, monuments, architecture and myths which reveal the significance of past events and orient humans toward future possibilities. In this sense, history is the horizon of human memory implicit in the present temporal field and its horizons. Such horizons of memory do not reveal the entire past but make leaps connecting only the events functioning significantly in the present temporal field. This suggests that history cannot be understood as a succession of causal events but as events primarily connected significatively. In fact the understanding of causality arose within a temporal field. The notion of an uninterrupted stream of events, in the form of efficient cause, was developed in the Stoic reflections on nature. Before that "aitia" was not an efficient cause but responsibility. In brief, temporal the field of action and history did not arise from experience of uninterrupted events, but was developed from responsible activity and its time.

The significative connection of historical events, coupled with the differentiation between the theoretical-linear and field time, account for the fact that there is no constant causal correlation between the changes in the natural and the historical spheres. Although natural events may change in accordance with linear causality, their significance and horizons of possibilities may remain constant within the temporal field of action. A tornado might uproot one section of a forest without changing the significance and horizon of possibilities of the tre-

es: wodd for the papermills. The so called material conditions may be similar, yet the structure of human action within a temporal field allows the conditions to assume an entirely different significance, function and horizon of possibilities. This thesis is admitted even by dogmatic Marxists, although they still wish to maintain, at least in principle, that the structure of human action must be derived from the material conditions. The same remarks apply to the technologically based notions of human progress.

Not all events play a role in human activity; they are selected and interpreted in accordance with the significance they have in the context of a particular activity and its horizons. Conversely, the horizons are also present selectively: significant possibilities are selected and insignificant rejected. The selectivity of events and horizons suggests a way to account for historical unity and continuity without the assumption of linear, causal succession. Although our process of selectivity may leap over events, their historical continuity consists of their significance within the temporal field. Even if the events are past and causally no longer efficient, their significance is still present. This does not mean that the significance of events follows a linear succession; rather the significance of the past event belongs to the present temporal field and its horizons of possibilities. It either expands or contracts the horizons by permitting the selectivity of more or less remote events as relevant within the present temporal field of action.

The expansion of past horizon does not imply that the entire significance of history may be captured. There may be events whose significance and truth will manifest itself only in the future. Truth itself is historical and reveals itself in historical time. The social scientist and the historian who know how to read events not as facts but significatively, may see the relevance of some past events reflected on the future horizon. In brief, the significance of an event transcends its present toward the past and future and the mere factual description of the event. The same holds true of past and fu-

ture events. Moreover, the future horizon may reveal hitherto unnoticed significance of past or present events and add to the constitution of continuity and unity of social events and their historical development.

### **Social structure and selectivity**

An in-depth investigation of the temporal field of activity is by itself inadequate without an extensive study of social structures as limitations to selectivity of significant and relevant events and possibilities. In the context delimited above, Luhmann has contributed extensively toward the understanding of the relationship between the temporal field and social structures. His suggestions are crucial for any progress in this area. Luhmann accepts the differentiation between temporal field and the theoretical-linear time and adds a qualification with respect to the selectivity of events. The past, present and future events assume significance and orientation not only within the temporal field of action but also within the horizons, views, aims and the prescribed selectivity by a social structure. Consequently, the structure of the temporal field of activity, is limited by the social structure and its selected-selectable possibilities. At the same time the social structure functions within the temporal field which contains open horizons of history and its significance for the selectivity of future possibilities. Moreover, the open horizons constitute the region of possibilities outside the ken of the social structure: in terms of the social structure they are impossible. Yet precisely such "impossible-possibilities" define the limit of the social structure and its horizons and predelineates the orientation for fundamental social changes and revolutions. An awareness of the limits of a social structure and its possibilities is required for any fundamental social change. Yet the awareness of such a limit assumes a presence of a possibility by which to judge the limit and toward which to orient the fundamental social change.

Within a social context not all the possibilities are equal; some are more remote than et-

hers and thus not all are equally significant. It could be said that the socially impossible is the socially unrealizable; socially it is an "impossible possibility" and reveals the limits of social structure. Of course the interrelationships between the socially possible and impossible are quite complex. What may be possible politically may be only remotely possible or even impossible economically; what is possible economically may not be possible technologically. Thus certain events may be excluded for the time being and become past for the social system. Yet they may be reinstated as significant for the social future provided a shift in social signification of events and temporal horizons has occurred. Of course, such a shift requires an understanding of "time-reflex" as a means of relating the social system to its possibilities and these in turn to the temporal field of action. The required complexities of time reflex cannot be here developed and will be reserved for the next section.

### **Time reflect and the last interpreter**

Although there are two major aspects constituting time reflex, their structures are similar. Hence we shall deal with one and refer to the other when necessary. The limits of the socially possible constitute a temporal horizon for the particular society which reflects the process of current events. Such events are temporal and their orientation, selectivity and significance are reflected from the future and past horizons. This is the first time-reflex. Since events are temporal, then the time reflex is also temporal with constantly shifting possibilities at the limit of the socially possible.

The limits of the socially possible are manifest only with respect to the socially impossible possibilities. These constitute the open horizon of the temporal field of activity which is the basis for the historical development and orientation of social process. This is the second time reflex. It reflects the limits of the socially possible. Since the social selectivity process of events requires temporal horizons of the socially possible, then the temporal field consti-

tutes a prerequisite for the understanding of the social processes, their limits and historical transformations. Were we limited to the current social conditions and socially predelineated possibilities, as sociologists claim we are, then no fundamental social transformation could occur. This is not to deny the limitations constantly imposed by the social structure and its possibilities; nevertheless such limitations are not absolute. We remain open within the temporal field of activity which manifests the limits of the social structure and the possibilities of its transformation. Hence the temporal field is fundamental both for social transformation and for the relationship between social structure and its temporal development and orientation. This relationship can now be described as "time-reflex." Any activity functions within society and time and consequently assumes the temporal field. In fact, as already noted, such an activity is totally correlated to the temporal field and its horizons. Hence let us take as an example of an activity of investigating society and its temporal process. The investigation is correlated to the selected events and possibilities of a given social structure; yet the investigation requires a limit from which the social structure may be seen. As Luhmann would argue, a system reproduces its own memory of the history of selectivity... of experience of the environment. Yet beyond this it reconstructs a world-history of unaccomplished selectivity required to grasp the limit of its selectivity. The limit is the socially "impossible possibilities" constituting an extension of the temporal field of activity of the investigator. Such a horizon of the temporal field reflects the limits of the social structure and its possibilities. Since both the social possibilities, as a temporal horizon of society, and the temporal field horizons are equally temporal, then the reflection of the social horizon of possibilities and their limit from the temporal field horizon constitutes a time reflex in time. In brief, the temporal field horizon has an indefinite depth of temporal possibilities which reflect the temporal horizons of social possibilities and their limits. Hence the time reflex,

while relating the social structure to the temporal field of action, provides a fundamental context for the activity of socio-temporal investigations.

It is now possible to sketch briefly the role of the time reflex. Since the activity of investigation of socio-temporal processes relates the social structure to the temporal field horizons, then such an activity is totally correlated to the time reflex and, as noted above, to the temporal field horizons. Such an activity constitutes the "last interpreter" who, while dealing with socio-temporal processes, is herself temporal. The "last interpreter" does not have to assume an extra-social and/or extra-temporal stance in order to investigate society and herself within it. This means at the same time that the changing, expanding or narrowing of the temporal horizons during the process or investigation also shifts the selectivity and significance of events and the continuation of social process by way of the time-reflex. Of course this occurs not only with the investigator of socio-temporal processes but with every member of society. Each understands events within the temporal horizons of possibilities co-present in the selectivity, orientation and definition of such events. Hence each member of society constitutes a time-reflex and hence the continuation of the social process.

It ought to be obvious that the future horizon selects not only the current events and their temporal orientation and limits but also the relevant past horizon. In turn an investigation of past events and their possibilities may constitute an opening to the future horizon. Thus the influence of the past on the present and future is not causal but selective and significative. While moving toward the future, the investigative activity also selects and establishes the orientation and interrelationships of past-present-future events. Since activity is correlative to the time reflex, then the time reflex is the ground for the understanding of all temporal interrelationships comprising the temporal movement of society. It accounts for the distinction and interconnection between the present of the past, present of the present, and the present of the

future. Each such present is given with its temporal horizons which intersect and are co-continuous with those of other presents. In brief, it accounts for the understanding of socio-historic presents as temporal fields with overlapping and co-continuing temporal horizons constituting the selectivity, significance, temporal location and orientation of events.

During the investigative activity the present shifts from one event to another that include shifts not only in the horizons of the present but also in those of the present of the past and the present of the future. Shifts in the present of the present include shifts in its horizons and correlatively call for the shifts in the horizons of the presents of past and future. Yet such a call is possible on the basis of the time reflex. The present temporal field, due to its time reflex, extends and overlaps with past and future temporal fields. What were still future possibilities and impossibilities for the present of the past may be realized in the present and even establish our future horizon of not yet realized possibilities and limiting impossibilities. In all cases the time reflex allows us to stay open within society and its limits and grasp such limits without leaving society or its temporal process.

## Notes

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## Postscript

Within the above framework, Luhmann's social theory is neither complete nor pretends to have dealt with the complexities of "temporal modalizations." Yet it is an advance for dealing with the problem of theory without any recourse to metaphysical explanations assuming an extra-social and extra-temporal stance. It assigns a function to theoretical thought which is primarily a critical surveillance of the current stance of social structure and its possibilities from a horizon of limitations which show the possibilities of fundamental social change. It fully recognizes that the opening of such possibilities is an inner-social and inner-temporal process and thus affects the very process of society. Yet the critical evaluation of society, as a theoretical function, requires cooperation from various human disciplines to show what is socially possible and impossible and a choice of such possibilities. But this includes human valuation and responsibility. And perhaps sciences, as integral part of societal development, should admit their selectivity and valuation and consequently assume responsibility for their impact.

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