Niklas Luhmann, *The Making of Meaning: From the Individual to Social Order*, C. Morgner (ed.), M. Hiley, C. Morgner and M. King (trans.), Oxford University Press, New York 2022, pp. 352, £ 74.00, ISBN 9780190945992

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The Making of Meaning collects five selections from *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik* (*Gesellschaftliche Struktur und semantische Tradition*, vol. 1, pp. 9-71; *Wie ist soziale Ordnung möglich?*, vol. 2, pp. 195-286; *Individuum, Individualität, Individualismus*, vol. 3, pp. 149-258; *Kultur als historischer Begriff*, vol. 4, pp. 31-54) and the posthumous *Zum Begriff der sozialen Klasse* (*Ideenevolution. Beiträge zur Wissenssoziologie* (2008), vol. 2, pp. 72-131), framed by C. Morgner's introduction and an afterword by M. King.

Its editorial wager is that these texts reveal a Luhmann poorly served by his Anglophone reputation as a "systems theorist". The volume opens with an exhaustive introduction by C. Morgner on Luhmann's sociology and the differences between "traditional" interpretations of meaning and Luhmann's account of it as – essentially – the operational medium of all experiencing and acting, through which communication can be actualised. M. King's afterword, also focused on this re-centring of Luhmann's theory, insightfully diagnoses a structural mismatch between this sociology and institutionalised Anglophone sociology.

Famously, Luhmann's sociology develops a *general theory of society* as made of communications, and, as such, results in the study of how system/environment differences, once reiterated and re-applied to themselves, constitute social systems. The "operational closure" and "cognitive openness" of such systems are meant to provide the recursivity of operations by the application of a code specific to each system (legal system acts on legal/illegal distinction, science on true-false, etc.) enabled through the system's structure of selections.

The structure of a system performs a constraint on the connectivity of its operations: the selection of the relations among elements that are admitted as condition of autopoiesis. Because the operational elements of meaning-constituting systems are events without duration, structure lies not in the relations between elements but in the limits of their recombination to be repeated across situations, allowing both identity and structural variability. Structures are thus "selections of selections": they restrict connectivity (a first selection), on which basis the system produces its elements (a second selection) – by securing the transition from one operation to the next, they enable a "dynamic stability", which, in turn, renders the evolutionary stabilisation possible within structural limits following the variation of elements. Systemic structural morphogenesis accounts for the evolution of social structures as an increasingly "improbable normalisation". Across all social communications (which means, for Luhmann, across society itself) "having meaning" implies that whatever is actualised in the present is a constitutive selection which only exists against a horizon of appresented, non-actualised possibilities. Semantics, by contrast, denotes the typified, situation-independent inventory of forms of meaning a society holds in reserve – capable (as "cultured semantics") of partially autonomous evolution through writing and textualisation. "Differentiation", in turn, refers to the primary form of societal self-subdivision (segmentary, centre-periphery, stratificatory, or functional) which determines the complexity achievable by the societal system and thereby the *limits of compatibility* within which semantic variation can stabilise.

In "Social Structure and Semantic Tradition" (pp. 28-83), Luhmann's critique of Koselleck's *Begriffsgeschichte* is that, even though it refers to historical events like the French Revolution, there is no theory of evolution underpinning how semantic transformation is linked to the evolution of the social structure. He attempts to develop, instead, a model of variation-selection-stabilisation for the evolution of cultured semantics *in reference to* the evolution of society as a whole. The question then becomes whether this can be achieved in terms of an evolution of ideas, or "as a history of ideas".

The possibility of the generalisation of meaning through semantics depends on the independence that the totality of its forms achieves from interactions across the social structure:

that is, arising from the employment of meaning as the medium for communications, part of which is "stored" as generalised meaning (semantics) made *independent* of situations. "Organising selectivity" achieved through meaning presents itself under the general forms of a *factual dimension,* a *temporal dimension* and a *social dimension* of meaning. The fact that semantics itself, as a "reserve" of meaning, arises from the correlation between meaning and social structures means, in turn, that complexity-reduction mechanisms in each of the aforementioned dimensions are not only relatively co-dependent but must allow a stabilisation of social interactions (a reduction of contingency as a premise for individual action) operated at various levels (defusing "clashes" arising between individual experience and scientific semantics, etc.). Therefore, semantics is related to the existence of social order in terms of the type of interactions it enables.

In a functionally differentiated society, dogmatisation is no longer available to produce a systematisation of knowledge resulting in reduced employability of previous versions of "cultured semantics" which needed a hierarchy of ranks to be produced. The differentiated subsystems of society (science, law, economy, politics) employ their distinctions reflexively in a manner that renders cultured semantics resistant to integration: cultured semantics (i.e. "ideas") now faces the very modern problem of scientific knowledge.

Yet, science is a subsystem and knowledge-based semantics is linked to its internal structures. The "proliferation" of sciences which accounts for the production of a scientific semantics across domain-specific theories (legal science, economics, etc.) responds only to the capabilities of generalisation which, in turn, the couplings with self-referential systems allow. Such theories remain the result of distinctions within the scientific system in observing how other systems perform their observations (namely, "observing observers").

The shift to a differentiated science does not end the evolution of ideas, Luhmann argues, but it "strip[s] it of its exclusive control of cultured semantics" (p. 68).

Therefore, a sociology of knowledge must be developed *under conditions of complexity* through a differentiated scientific system. It is now possible to consider the latent structures negatively selected by each subsystem's own structuring of meaning as forms of regulation of exclusion (for example "moral

judgement must not be supposed to operate in legal statements") which serve to stabilise the distinctions in the use of meaning across subsystems, but render independent "ideas" unworkable.

Only the evolutionary achievements of functional differentiation within the scientific system and the self-referentiality of scientific knowledge itself eventually enable the problem of social order to be correctly posed. It is a problem which, to be posited, *must already have been solved*: the question "how is social order possible?" (pp. 195-286) is only made available *because social order already exists*.

After referencing the problem of social order (which initially posited itself in theory as the double problem of individual-to-individual and individual-to-society interactions), and historically ranging from the concept of community to the model of social contract, Luhmann develops a solution that both draws on Parsons' theory and turns against it. Parsons' formulation of *double contingency* remained limited to actors, disregarding the components of action (action; object; orientation; modality); it is countered by the thesis that persons and social systems are each other's environment, coordinated only through meaning, with order arising from double contingency and *interpenetration* (systems remaining each other's environment while making their complexity mutually available).

Two of the three remaining chapters are best read as variations on a single procedure – taking a concept and showing it to be the semantic correlate of the move from stratified to functionally differentiated society. "Individual, Individuality, Individualism" (pp. 217-299) turns on the distinction between inclusion- and exclusion-based individuality: where stratified societies locate the person by rank, family, and name, functional differentiation makes such placement impossible and relocates individuality to a position "outside society" in the self – yielding the modern semantics of the unique subject that crystallizes around 1800. "Culture as a Historical Concept" (pp. 300-319) relocates culture from first- to second-order observation, deriving the modern concept from the act of comparison, which lends it a "birth defect of contingency" and makes it available only to a society able to reflect on itself as contingent; culture is at once the memory of

social systems – the ongoing forgetting and remembering of autopoietic communication.

"On the Concept of Social Class" (pp. 165-216) employs the same methodology. "Social class" (from the Physiocrats, through the English political economists' distinction rich/poor, to Marx's capital/labour) denotes, for Luhmann, a "distribution of distribution": i.e. society observing how individuals are allocated to unequal shares of goods.

The pivotal mechanism: in stratified society, rank was visible in face-to-face interaction. Functional differentiation removes society-as-a-whole from interaction, so *strata* become classes, surrendering their grip on social interaction. Hence class consciousness becomes a *problem* – it must be produced, because people no longer need to know their "estate" to interact, only that all are formally equal. Because function systems do not pursue distribution at the level of the totality of society, modern society is capable of tolerating a reduced clustering of advantages through uncoordinated mechanisms – such as money or organisational careers. The resulting elite cannot inherit its position or act as a "ruling class", giving little incentive for class struggle from below. The payoff: under functional differentiation, stratification persists but is functionless (even harmful); the class-scheme itself reproduces the endless controversy between those who affirm and those who deny class. Decisively, class theory cannot explain why functional differentiation dominates, whereas functional-differentiation theory *has a place* for class. Therefore, a shift from "class as a principle" to the *consequences of class-semantics* essentially becomes a way to understand the forms of meaning this persistence generates.

The whole reasoning, though not clarified in a particularly exhaustive manner in the essay, is better understood through the concept of conflict/contradiction in Luhmann's systems theory.

Luhmann, in brief, labels 'contradiction' as the possibility of rejecting a communication: conflict is the system developed by the chain of reactions to contradictions with other contradictions, and so on. The negative *double contingency* which follows makes it possible to connect negative communications to other negative communications ("I will not do this if you don't do that", marking conflict *as a system*).

Then, as a system, conflict is a "parasitical" one, which either triggers fruitful variations, or leads to the collapse of the system itself. Under functional differentiation, it is up to the legal system to *anticipate possible conflicts* and as such act as an immune system for society, depending, of course, on a mechanism which supposes first the incentive to "juridify" conflicts, based on normative expectations, and then the capacity of the legal system itself to combine and re-combine its elements to actualise only controlled solutions and "defuse" contradictions.

This does not mean that conflict could ever be eliminated or absorbed: performing "social control" would, simply as content of its operation, *reproduce conflict* (which does sound relatively ironic, considering that Luhmann's systems theory has been broadly characterised as "conflict-less" in more or less coherent ways). It means, though, that the inadequacy of the structures proven by conflict itself is capable of initiating an evolutionary process for the system, triggering variations.

Law *anticipates* contradictions in order to increase the probability that certain negations rather than others are actualised; it may even *create* conflict so as to fix it as a legal possibility – a redundancy on which further operations can draw – and thereby raise its capacity to defuse conflict in controlled form.

Neither can contradiction arise independently of the communication it rejects: it is nothing but a form of self-reference of the communication, which makes it possible to conceive that some expectations will be granted realisation and others will not.

Nonetheless, functional differentiation renders it virtually impossible to polarise conflict in reference to "class", which, essentially, employs politico-economic semantics based on a stratified social structure, where forms of interaction can be dually coded (in some formulations of the class problem) as proletarian/bourgeois. "Marx's theory fails to cast sufficient light upon functional differentiation precisely because *Capital* succeeded in articulating the conflict between the classes so convincingly by means of economic theory" (p. 214).

Despite the praise Luhmann has, here and elsewhere, given to Marx's formulation, the issue remains that it is unable to "monopolise" contradictions arising under functional differentiation (one could then ask whether Marx's concept of class could ever be conceived, even in the most deterministic

interpretations, as a theory embracing *all* social interaction, and, above all, as resolving into a matter of "distributing distribution").

Luhmann argues that "the theory of functionally differentiated society has a place for the concept of class. It is able to show that differences between strata are produced and perhaps even exacerbated under functional differentiation, even though these differences hold no functional significance and may even have a negative impact upon society" (p. 215). The fact that the conflict unabsorbable by law could partially "localise" around clusters of distribution across social systems and that the concept of class fails to function as "distribution of distribution" (as a predictor) raises, beyond Luhmann, not so much the problem of whether the concept of class is tenable as the question of *which concept of class* is at issue.

A shift from a "semantics of order" to "a semantics of struggle" in the employment of class-semantics remains unattainable for Luhmann. Most of all, it could be asked whether it is his stance on meaning and semantics which renders the concept of class unworkable because, essentially, it already saturates the ideology-structure linkage. Besides this, if contradiction is conceived the way Luhmann does, then class-clustered contradictions can only aim at pushing towards localised de-differentiations (for instance, the expectation that political decisions will eventually only be decided economically).

That being said, the anthology (besides its merits of re-vitalising the debate on Luhmann's theory) crystallises particularly well the need to re-read Luhmann's stance on semantics and meaning.

In sharp contrast to Koselleck's historical semantics, Luhmann ties the generalisation of meaning to the evolution of social structure, with the consequence that the *concepts* of *Begriffsgeschichte* lose what for Koselleck defined them: their capacity to "contain a temporality", and through it to gather and "localise" tension. For Luhmann a theory of meaning is possible only as a theory of communication, and so only as a theory of society; concepts hold no temporality that is not already the temporality of the social structure. The cost of this move appears to be twofold. By blurring the gap between historical concept and social structure on the one side, and by "totalising" the circulation of meaning to the whole of society

on the other, the theory yields a social space *oversaturated* with ideology: one in which what can be meant, and the very possibilities of its variation, are limited in advance to what existing communications already permit.

Yet, as translation and editorial argument the volume decisively shifts how Luhmann is read in English. What it leaves open is whether centring meaning is also a limit: whether a theory in which meaning is the medium of all communication can still house the antagonisms it seems already to have absorbed. It also allows us, among other things, to understand the differences from, and debts to, Koselleck's school and historical semantics that Luhmann shared.