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Sociology

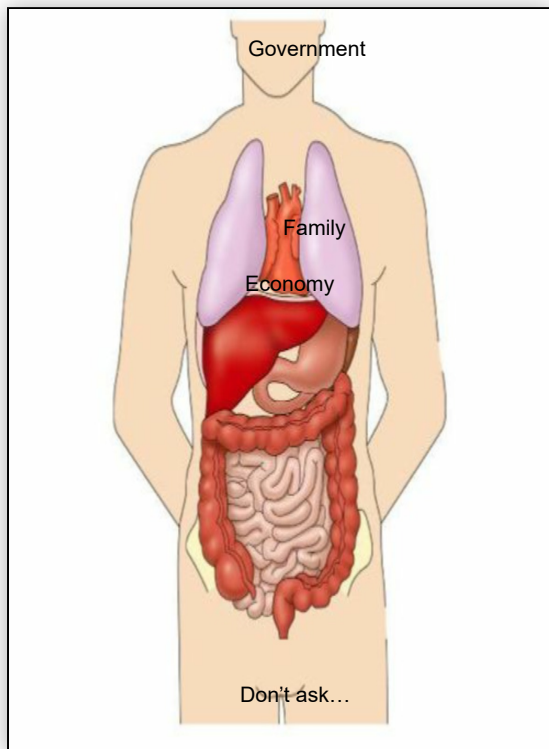## Updating Functionalism: Luhmann's System Theory
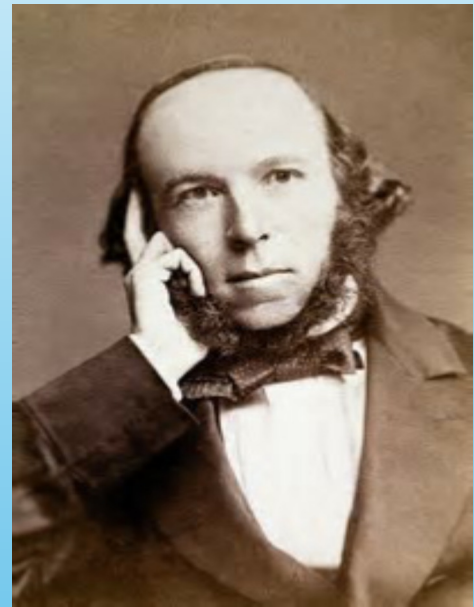
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Teaching Notes

Functionalism…

When students are first introduced to the idea of a "functionalist perspective" it's usually through an "organismic" - or organic if you prefer - analogy; the idea human societies can be likened, in term of their broad characteristics, features and development, to physical organisms (normally, but not necessarily, considered in terms of the human individual).

Government
Family
Economy
Don't ask…

Herbert Spencer (1820 – 1903)

The "organic analogy", as far as sociology is concerned, can be attributed to Herbert Spencer, the 19th century biologist and philosopher and now largely-ignored father of English sociology.

Spencer's biological background led him to argue human societies were analogous to biological organisms in terms of their physical and social charcateristics and evolution.

As a way of *introducing* the perspective there's nothing particularly wrong with this analogy; on the contrary, it can be a useful way to help students understand the basic principles underpinning this general approach.

However, we need to ask whether the analogy has long-term utility in terms of how students are encouraged to approach and evaluate this perspective, in terms of two questions:

1. Is a worldview rooted in the ideas and assumptions of 19th century science applicable to our understanding of how societies work in 21st century Britain?

2. In terms of teaching and learning do we need to develop how students understand this general approach? In other words, are students, at the end of a two-year course, in exactly the same theoretical space as when they began?

One answer to both of these questions is to examine a contemporary example of structural functionalist thinking, Luhmann's System Theory.

Systems Theory

Luhmann's systems theory begins from the idea of a 'world system' - the idea that all societies in the world are in some way connected - and effectively works backwards to an explanation of individual social action. To understand how this works we need to think about societies as **complex systems**.

Luhmann assumes human behaviour is generally characterised by **complexity**, considered in terms, for example, of the number and range of possible relational combinations that now exist across the social world.

You can think about these relational ties in both individual terms - tracing, for example, both the **direct** (face-to-face) ties you have with people, such as family and friends, and the vast number of **indirect** ties you have (think, for example, about how you are connected to others through social media) - and wider social terms. These involve thinking about the various connections between different societies - economic, political and cultural - that impact on our behaviour in some way.

Interactionism
An alternative perspective on structural development...

Luhmann's persepctive is also an explicit critique of Interactionist approaches and, in particular the idea complex systems are created through the purposeful actions of Individuals,

The question, from an Interactionist perspective is, to paraphrase Heise (1996), how do the '*minute-by-minute behaviour inventions of millions of individuals culminate in the machine-like daily order*' that, to take only one example, educates us in schools and colleges across the country?

How, in other words, is social order possible if 'society' consists of people 'going about their individual lives'?

Network Theory

The answer, Heise suggests, is '*society emerges from the creative activities of enculturated individuals*'. In other words, patterns of behaviour – how they originate and develop in terms of social groups – can be understood in terms of social networks based, according to Cook (2001), on two features:

1. **Nodes** – defined as people (individuals or groups) in a particular network. '*The only requirement for a node,*' according to Cook, '*is that it must be able to relate in some manner to other nodes*'. This relates to the concept of:

2. **Ties** – or the relationships between two nodes (that can be many and varied – think about the range of relationships within your sociology class, for example).

Complexity and Chaos

One feature of complexity in late-modernity for Luhmann is the *potential* for **chaos**.

If social life is (essentially) based on conscious individuals making behavioural choices across a range of groups and social networks (as Interactionists' argue), it's difficult to see how social order can be created and maintained; in other words, if we focus on the idea that **networks** are built upwards – from individuals at the bottom to systems at the top – it's difficult to explain how individual behaviours (in terms of the possible behavioural choices people can make in any given situation) can produce a relatively orderly and predictable social system.

Luhmann suggests this is possible only if we think in terms of **systems** (such as a political system of government, a legal system and the like) imposing an order and stability on individual behaviour that is, in turn, sufficiently flexible to accommodate individual choice and deviation. A simple way to envisage this idea is to think in terms of a *social network* like Facebook.
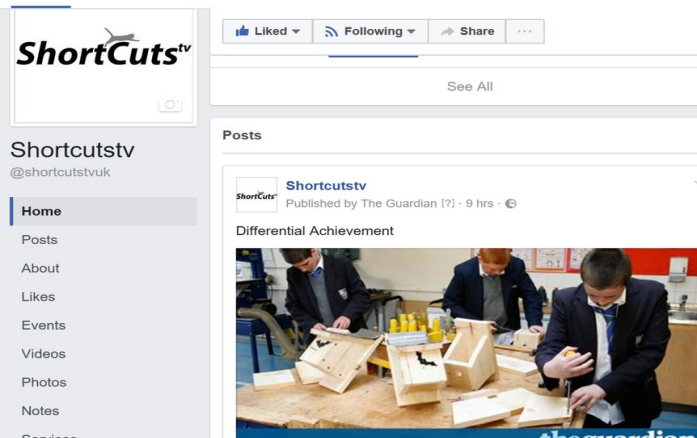
In this example Facebook provides the network infrastructure within which social interaction (the everyday posts, connections and the like) takes place. Facebook itself is simply a system which allows individuals to engage in different forms of social interaction. In one way, therefore, the "everyday interaction" between these disparate individuals "creates" the network - but such interaction cannot take place without Facebook's network structure; the one needs the other to function (a symbiotic network structure) that grows organically.

Ties (a relationship people recognise) are generated through shared meanings based around role-play – for example, the tie between a teacher and a student in an educational network. Group networks are also not self-contained; they involve links to other social networks, which leads to the development of larger networks and, ultimately, a sense of social structure.

Cook refers to the connections between networks as *bridging ties* – a relationship that '*connects two otherwise distant portions of a network*'.

Continuing the educational theme, a class teacher plays a bridging role here because they link a specific class into the wider structure of the educational network. Individual students may also represent bridging ties by, for example, linking a school into a parental network. In this way we can see how, according to Heise and Durig (1997):

• *Micro-actions, or* the actions of individuals, lead to:

• *Macro-actions* – routines that shape the behaviour and structure of large organisational networks.

In Heise's (1996) formulation, network theory – what he terms **Affect Control Theory** (ACT) – can be used to explain how '*the majestic order of society emerges from repetitive application of evolved cultural resources to frame and solve recurrent problems*' – social structures result from people's repeated, meaningful actions within social networks.

Autopoiesis

This "organic relationship" goes some way towards understanding how, according to Vandenberghe (1998), 'the social ordering of chaos' comes about - through what Luhmann, argues is a process of **autopoiesis** (pronounced 'auto-poe-ee-sis').

For Maturana and Varela (1980), autopoiesis involves an organisation (such as a social system or social network in this example) being **self-reproductive**. Social systems, from this viewpoint, are not *simply reproduced*, as Interactionists' argue, because of the everyday interactions of their members.

Rather, the fact we are all born into an existing society means the system *reproduces us*; in order to engage in social interaction, for example, we have to be socialised into a variety of pre-existing social structures (involving roles, norms, values and the like) that, in effect, lead us to "reproduce the system" through our everyday behaviours. in this respect, Luhmann argues social systems are both:

• **Autonomous** – systems effectively operate 'independently' of people - something they are able to do because, for Luhmann, societies are not 'things' or 'structures', as such, but **communication networks**. That is, systems of linked individuals who, while being a necessary reproductive part of the network do not constitute the network itself. Imagine, for example, a social system as if it were the Internet; whenever you connect to the network your actions help to reproduce it but you are not the network itself.

• **Self-maintaining**: As in the above example, through their involvement 'in' and use of 'the system', people effectively contribute to its reproduction.

To put this another way, think about society as, in Maturana and Varela's evocative description, '*a living machine*' - one that, as Krippendorff (1986) argues '*produces its own organisation and maintains and constitutes itself".*

We can clarify these ideas with a couple of examples:

1. While social networks such as Facebook or Twitter exist "in cyberspace" they only "come alive" through the actions of their users as they interact with others (Google+ anyone?). While their users clearly reproduce the system they can only do so on the system's terms - and if you leave Facebook the system still functions happily without you.

2. For a more-concrete example, every Sociology class in England is structured by a range of exterior factors – some formal and direct (the Specification, for example), others informal and indirect – your personal reasons for being in class perhaps.

On a systems level the behaviour is much the same. Each class is a network contributing to the continued functioning of the educational system without the conscious efforts of the people involved. When you arrive for your sociology class you don't think, '*How does this behaviour help to reproduce social relationships at the structural level of society?*' - and even if you did you'd have no way of knowing exactly what behaviour is required to 'reproduce the education system'.

Structure, therefore, is imposed from *outside* and reproduced *within* (the class), which effectively means structure is the most significant variable involved in understanding human behaviour; as with our Facebook example, without the initial sense of structure, a social network could not form.

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