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Diskussion
Discussion

Critical Response to Moritz Mutter

Robert Seyfert

This critical response answers to Moritz Mutter's reply "(Mis)readings of Luhmann? Reply to Robert Seyfert" in this issue of Behemoth which scrutinizes Seyfert's critique of Systems Theory in the last issue Vol. 7, No. 1 (http://ojs.ub.uni-freiburg.de/behemoth/article/view/776/706).

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Keywords, dt.: Ordnungsproblem, Chaos, Doppelte Kontingenz, Negativität und Differenz

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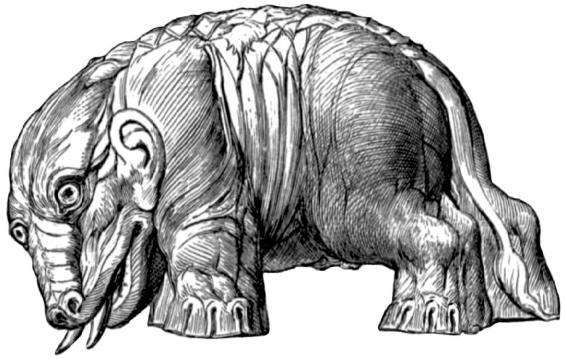

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I am grateful for and honored by the effort and time Moritz Mutter has invested in reading my article and for the detailed response he wrote. I also would like to thank the editors of *Behemoth* for giving me the opportunity to respond to Mutter's critique. As usual in these cases, my brief response has to be limited to a few key points that I think are most crucial to his interpretation of my text.

As the title suggests, Mutter's response is a rather straightforward rejection of my argument, based on the impression that I have completely misunderstood Luhmann's theory, that indeed, I too often claim the opposite of what Luhmann actually means. However, the main argument of my text is not primarily about Systems Theory or Luhmann, and I am rather disinclined to engage in a debate about Luhmann, which Mutter appears to want to instigate. My point is rather of a more general nature: the problem of order – which serves as a conceptual starting point for most theories in Sociology and the Social Sciences because it seems to carry the least theoretical assumptions – is a false problem. Instead of asking about the possibility of order (why there is order rather than disorder, or how order is possible), we need to focus on questions concerning the relations and effects between different orders. In turn, 'disorder' should be understood as a normative category, not an analytical one: it designates an order that we do not like, that disappoints us, threatens etc. Obviously, there is a wide range of possible reactions to other orders, reaching from attraction to repulsion, and these reactions have consequences on how the other order will affect us. With regards to 'disorder', which is really a particular treatment of another order, I have recommended turning to Bergson's theory, which explains the circumstances under which differing orders are perceived and treated as disorder and chaos. Even if we limited ourselves to the analysis of inner-systemic perspectives, as Systems Theory does, there are far more options than the default assumed by Systems theory – which is that systems *in general* simply treat influences from their respective environments merely as disorder.

Mutter does not respond to my bigger argument about the problem of order in general; he only discusses whether the problem of order applies to Luhmann's Systems Theory, and his response focuses on specific concerns about my interpretations of Luhmann. Unfortunately, Mutter neglects my argument that there are alternatives to order other than 'disorder' and 'chaos'. His primary claim is that Luhmanns' Systems Theory is not derived from and based on the problem of order. This is of course a legitimate objection, but even if he were right – even if Luhmann's Systems Theory is not based on the problem of order (and I don't think Mutter is right) – I want to point out that in my argument, Systems Theory in general (not just Luhmann's version) serves as an illustration of how

most theoretical approaches in Sociology and the Social Sciences are built upon the assumptions formulated in the problem of order, a problem which I have shown is in fact a false one (I discuss other approaches elsewhere **[1]**).

Aside from this general clarification, I will focus on two points in Mutter's reply upon which the rest of his response appears to be based. First, he claims that in Systems Theory the concept of double contingency is not defined by instability but rather by super-stability (138). From this, he contends, it follows that Systems Theory is in fact not about the problem of order and does not stage a specter of chaos but on the contrary it is about the problem of "stasis" and "boredom" (ibid.). Second, contrary to my analysis that shows how Systems Theory is entirely based on the principle of negativity, Mutter claims that Systems Theory is a fundamentally positive approach.

First, Mutter questions my claim that situations of double contingency are unstable and uncertain. Situations of contingency, according to Mutter, are about either a lack of determination or situations of indeterminacy in systems: thus, double contingency is really a problem of stability. Thus, instead of fighting the specter of chaos, double contingency tackles the problem of stasis, or boredom as Mutter claims. Discussions about interpretative differences are often intricate and mostly bothersome for the reader, especially in the case of Systems Theory. However, I will say two things. First, I have shown how Parsons, who invented the term "double contingency", defines it as interactions that are inherently unstable (146). Mutter himself quotes Luhmann who says double contingency "draws in chance" (138). It is safe to say chance is neither stable nor super-stable, for what could be more unstable than chance? Double contingency creates chance, or to be more precise, its emergence is accompanied by chance. It is important to be precise at this point because in Mutter's interpretation double contingency seems to solve the problem of "one's own awareness of uncertainty" (139), as if uncertainty were a problem of individually acting systems. It is not: uncertainty (and instability as I would argue) emerges when systems interact or communicate with each other. Interaction or communication with other systems creates situations of double contingency and consequently induces chance in these systems. It is only this creation of chance that leads to what Mutter has been described as indeterminacy or indecision: It is this move that makes it an inherently unstable affair – at least, that is what Systems Theory tells us. It is double contingency that creates the problem of indecision or indeterminacy, a problem that needs to be solved in order for a "social system to get going" (146) – indeterminacy and indecision might lead to situations

[1] Seyfert, Robert (2015): "'I am inclined not to'. Circumventing Contestation and Competition", in: Nicole Falkenhayner / Andreas Langenohl / Johannes Scheu / Doris Schweitzer / Kacper Szulecki (eds.) *Rethinking Order Idioms of Stability and De-stabilization*, transcript: Bielefeld (forthcoming).

where both (or more) systems lose their capability to act or communicate.

It is here, as I argue, where Luhmann comes up with the idea that actors and systems need to be reflexively aware of the inherent instability of interactions and the possibility of communicative chaos, which might include non-communication. I quote him on this extensively (ibid.): systems must be able and must be willing to "solve this contingency". This is reflected in Mutter's quote of Luhmann that states that double contingency not only 'draws in chance' but also (!) "creates sensitivity to chance" (138). Furthermore, I believe I have shown how this awareness of instability is genealogically derived from Hobbes' concept of fear as the main drive of social systems: reflexive awareness is the functional equivalent (in Systems Theory) of fear in Hobbes' philosophy (or at least, the functional equivalent of what Luhmann and Parsons read into Hobbes). I do not simply claim that Parsons and Luhmann adopt the problem of order from Hobbes, but rather, my argument is that they adopt Hobbes theory in a particular manner and transform it for their own purpose. This transformation also includes a critique of Hobbes, which Mutter interprets as a rejection.

The second point is related to the character of communication and interaction with other systems. I claim that Systems Theory is entirely unable to account for positive effects and influences between different systems. Effects between systems are conceptualized merely as irritation, as something other than the system itself, as the negation of the system. Mutter calls this a positive relation. Nonetheless, our interpretations do not seem to be that different. His quote of Luhmann that describes how systems supply each other with "disorder" is very helpful here. First of all, *dis–order* is, analytically speaking, a *negative* term. The prefix 'dis-' designates a negating force and in speaking of a supply of disorder the other order remains unspecified: it is a negative determination. Mutter is of course right in pointing out that for Systems Theory such supply with disorder is understood to be positive and a vital mechanism. My point, however, was more complex. I tried to show that such an idea of positivity is simply – and that is the whole point of the paper – *negativity dressed up as positivity*. **[2]** A system makes something positive out of this disorder without receiving anything essential from disorder, that is, without receiving anything on the latter's terms. Systems Theory is completely unable to account for positive, or if you will ontological, influences from other systems. There is no way of describing how systems are *supplied with order* from other systems. However, reducing the interplay between different systems to irritation and the induction of disorder is reductionist and fails to account for the myriad positive effects and affects to which we are continuously

[2] Luhmann does not invent this method – to create positivity out of negativity – rather he borrowed it from Dialectics and more specifically from Hegel. This theoretical slide of hand has been criticized before (see, e.g., Gilles Deleuze (1994): *Difference and Repetition*, New York: Columbia University Press.)

subjected and to which we subject others. **[3]** Other orders do not only supply disorder, but also inspire, attract, repulse. Mutter doubts my claim, namely, that Systems Theory cannot account for the various relations of systems and points to the discussions about relations between functionally differentiated societies. However, he himself describes those relations as "intransparent" (140) which yet again is nothing but a *negative* description. Systems (functionally differentiated or otherwise) *may* be nontransparent to one other, that may occasionally happen, but the mutual influence of systems on one another is very often all too transparent. A positive approach would show how other systems *supply radically other types of order* and how *patterns of order* move between different systems: how they affect one another, compete with one another, replace one another, transform themselves in the process of fading into one another, etc. – such would be a truly positive approach.

And I have hinted that other (non-sociological) theories such as Complexity Theory have gone some way in conceptualizing such mutual influences. **[4]** For a "useful debate" to unfold, as Mutter hopes for in his conclusion, it might be helpful to include such approaches and leave the realms of (Luhmann's) Systems Theory.

[3] By "me" I do not simply mean myself, humans, actors and individuals – as Mutter seems to read my text (139) – but all types of entities such as systems, actants, networks, assemblages etc. He also seems to take me for a Habermasian (140), an insult I decided to ignore.

[4] I have also made an attempt to develop a social theory that includes positive and mutual effects and *affects* of institutions: *Das Leben der Institutionen*, Weilerswist: Velbrück 2011.