

observation takes place in time lapses, one cannot observe all at the same time. Time itself is a product of observation of systems that must reduce complexity in a selective way, i.e., choosing alternatives – and leaving other possibilities in the background. In every observation a world emerges, i.e., a world of potential other observations and of other observers. Without systems, there is no reason to see a “reality”; only systems need to operate in realities.

« 5 » Finally, it is possible that this confusion about Luhmann’s epistemology is caused by the *medium* of language – an unavoidable medium for any theoretical formulation. The form “signifier/signified” (Luhmann 2012: 124ff) of this medium produces an ontological effect; the signifier would be “outside” and would be represented “inside” the system by means of the signified. An “apple” would be outside of the observer as a signifier and the word “apple” would be the representation – the signified – inside the system that observes and communicate about fruits or computers. Nevertheless, the form signifier/signified appears only when a system operates with this communication medium. The correspondence between the two sides of the form signifier/signified is due only to a system that operates with this medium, and not to an environment that enters with all its complexity into a system. The signifier it is no more real than the signified since both are the result of communicative operations. In this sense, ontology itself can be understood as a result of language (Eco 1999: 22ff), i.e., as a moment in the operations of a system that treats its own complexity by distinguishing an inside and an outside.

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“So, What Do You Think About Luhmann’s Ontology?”

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> **Upshot** • Matuszek’s article is about the way Luhmann reshaped but failed to eliminate ontology. I try to contribute with some thoughts about how Luhmann’s theory is in fact based on certain ontological assumptions.

« 1 » It was some years ago when, during a talk I gave at a conference on posthumanism,¹ I was presented with the question of whether I agree with Luhmann’s ontology. This caught me by surprise since at that time I was not prepared to answer such an “illegitimate” question: How can one use the “semantics of old Europe” (Luhmann 2013: 183) when analyzing the Luhmannian world? Thus, I limited my answer to a simple mumble, “What ontology?” and my questioner concluded with a smile, “I see, you agree.” But I was not satisfied with my answer; neither was I enlightened by her response. And that brings us to Krzysztof Matuszek’s interesting target article, which, for obvious reasons, I read very carefully. So, let us see, albeit in short, whether there are more ways to support the view that Luhmann was in fact employing ontological assumptions, although very different ones than those he called “old European.”

« 2 » When Luhmann, as Matuszek points out (§19), states that “there are systems,” he also makes an implicit assumption: *there are observers*. For how else can a statement about “what is” come about? This assumption is empirical, but *at the same time* methodological *and* ontological; the classification one may choose depends on the question “Who is the observer?” (and we know that classification is the framework of ontology). That question takes us back to the theoretical concepts underlying Luhmann’s

theory, as articulated by many scholars before him; I choose to refer only to the ideas of the most influential among them, namely George Spencer-Brown (2008), Heinz von Foerster (2003) and Humberto Maturana & Francisco Varela (1980).

« 3 » The concept of the observer is the key to understanding Luhmann’s complex theory. Social and psychic systems are treated as observers of the first or second order, and theories are dealt with as descriptions of systems, or even societies, operating as observers upon their own existence. The observer conceives of himself as a distinct entity, as a whole. Therefore, ontology is unavoidable. On the other hand, Luhmann is in conformity with his theory when maintaining that this *is not the case* of the “semantics of old Europe.” Hence, we have a redefinition of the term “ontology”: it does not refer to an intersubjective world description but to a multitude of descriptions that co-exist through double contingency (Luhmann 1995: 103–136).

« 4 » This insight cannot be attributed to Luhmann though. W. V. O. Quine already noted: “Disagreement in ontology involves basic disagreement in conceptual schemes” (Quine 1980: 16). And vice versa: *deviating conceptual schemes result in different ontologies* and, therefore, in different cosmologies. Furthermore, in a functionally differentiated society, there cannot be a “privileged point of observation” resulting in a possibility to bind society as a whole in a singular world description and, therefore, a singular perspective; that is: an intersubjective ontology. However, that does not imply that the concept of ontology can be abandoned altogether. While the observer is still the “king,” there are many “kings” in contemporary world society. But how does the observer operate; that is, what is it that makes the observer an observer? The obvious answer (and also Luhmann’s answer) is that the observer can only operate by *distinctions*.

« 5 » The distinction is an operation that is the fundamental concept in Luhmann’s work. Following the well-known injunction of Spencer-Brown “Draw a distinction” (Spencer-Brown 2008: 3), Maturana & Varela (1980: 73) add: “A universe comes into being when a space is severed into two.” Therefore, the universe emerges through a distinction. Already this reveals an ontologi-

1 | “From humans to persons: Niklas Luhmann’s posthumanism” at the conference “Audio-visual posthumanism: Aesthetics, cultural theory and the arts” in Mytilene, 23–27 September 2010.

cal assumption, for to whom is the injunction addressed? We should also note that Spencer-Brown calls that injunction “construction.” Now, if Luhmann genuinely were to avoid ontology altogether, he should avoid the concept of distinction. But for Luhmann, distinction is not a methodological approach nor is it an operation among others. It is *the prerequisite* for every operation. But, is there a distinction in the Luhmannian world(s) that is taken for granted? I reckon there is, namely the distinction I/You.

« 6 » Spencer-Brown notes that “We take as given the idea of distinction and the idea of indication...” (Spencer-Brown 2008: 1). That is, *it is the concept of ontology that is taken as given*. In other words, the ability of the observer to conceive of himself as something distinct from his environment is taken as granted. How can that be? We can look for answers in John McCrone (2003), Jean Piaget (1972), Maturana (2005) and many more researchers. Here, I will only quote McCrone:

“The story is much more complicated than the old nature-nurture, blank slate versus genetic module, dichotomy allows. It is really a three-way evolutionary story in which there is an evolution of the brain’s circuitry through experience and synaptic-pruning, coupled to the influence exerted by biological evolution through the genes and cultural evolution through memes. So three kinds of adaptive history get interwoven and no single experiment or simple slogan can unravel the intricate processes that forge a human brain.” (McCrone 2003: 132)

« 7 » That is, *observers create observers*. Now, the distinction I/You may be considered transcendental, but only in a world where there are observers that can communicate the descriptions they construct. This assumption leaves, for instance, feral children² in an ever “unmarked space,” a world about which nothing can be commu-

2| “Feral children” are humans that were discovered at different ages of their lives (i.e., not necessarily “children”), having grown without human contact and presenting behavioral characteristics that did not allow scientists to classify them as “persons.” They are considered to be an empirical proof of Jean Piaget’s (1972) hypothesis that persons emerge only due to interactions

nicated and that is therefore, in accordance with Luhmann’s theoretical apparatus, non-existent.

« 8 » I will close this comment, with a short reference to the concept of reality, since Matuszek also deals with it.

« 9 » Are we adapted to reality, or do we construct reality altogether? That is, can we assume a reality independent of any observer, or is the observer bound to conceive certain aspects of a world that exists in its own right, or – finally – is any world view a pure construction? Luhmann does not seem to genuinely care about the problem. For Luhmann radical constructivism is not a philosophical position *per se* but rather a methodological manoeuvre. This is not to say that, in some way, Luhmann assumes the existence of a reality independent of the observer. On the contrary, the radicalism of his approach lies in the refusal to even discuss an intersubjective – let alone transcendental – view of the world. The world is a construction, and that includes the observers who circularly reconstruct themselves in a circularly reconstructed world. The observers invent themselves-in-the-world. Those concepts are so basic that they cannot be refuted without ruining Luhmann’s theoretical apparatus. In my view, herein lies Luhmann’s concept of “selections”: *reality is the testbed of systems’ selections*, nothing more or less. This of course says nothing about reality *per se*, but it says everything about self-referential systems that continuously come up with their own expectations. Reality is bound to remain unknown, for it is never a matter for the observer; only himself is the problem. Thus reality is irrelevant for the observer of the observers (i.e., Luhmann and his followers). It is, so to speak, only an abstract tool, an expanding horizon (Husserl 1960: 44) of opportunities for further selections, but, in any case, a distant, dim horizon.

« 10 » Matuszek’s article is inspiring. Not because it is supposed to give a *final* answer to Luhmann’s ontology. That cannot be done, and the author is certainly not to blame: it is definitely an inherent characteristic of Luhmann’s theory. Luhmann created a powerful tool for the observation of social systems and their interrelations but in the

with persons (Candland 1993; Maturana & Varela 1998; McCrone 2003).

form of a flux. His theory leaves space for many approaches and interpretations, being a theory about a flux, that is, about the functionally differentiated society – a flux for a flux. Of course, the term “radical operative constructivism” is (in my opinion) a very accurate and convincing condensation of Luhmann’s fundamental approach. Still, if one wants to do justice to Luhmann, his views are bound to remain open to *contin- gent* descriptions. So, the concrete value of the target article is that it contributes to a discussion that hopefully will evolve among with the evolution of theories on constructivism and postmodernism.

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The Forgotten Temporal Dimension of Luhmann’s Constructivism

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> **Upshot** • Matuszek’s article points to some ambiguities in Luhmann’s late work, but the reinterpretations he offers suffer from various sociological and philosophical difficulties. By elaborating on the relevance of time in Luhmann’s operational constructivism, this commentary opens up some alternative interpretations.

« 1 » Krzysztof Matuszek’s article discusses a range of issues pertinent to the constructivist foundations of Niklas Luhmann’s social theory. Matuszek makes use of some ambiguities in Luhmann’s late work in order to provide a number of reinterpretations. But I suggest that it is useful to pay more attention to the tradition of second-order cy-