Society as Constructed Ontology?

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> **Upshot** · The question of whether contingency can be limited concerns the foundations of sociological systems theory as a theory of cognition. This commentary argues that while such limits may seem plausible and apparent at first, they would consequentially give rise to an ontological notion of society within society. Rather, the commentary proposes to understand the limits identified in the target article as social functions structuring expectations in situations of double contingency.

« 1 » Krzysztof Matuszek's target article proposes a re-reading and re-synthesis of epistemological elements in sociological systems theory as what the author calls "radical operative constructivism" (§38). Analyzing Luhmann's sociological systems theory for realist vs. constructivist approaches, Matuszek locates quasi-ontologies in the distinctions reality/construction, operation/observation, and system/environment (§40). Matuszek does not take these distinctions as statements of a realist approach in the theory, so not as fully ontological, but rather as concerning "the methodological status of the concept of system" (§20). Nevertheless, he describes these distinctions as "necessary" (§40) for any operation to take place at all, which for him has the operational effect of them being inherent limits of contingency (§§36–41). I argue that this can be true for observed operations of systems, but that it does necessarily constitute the existence of limits in situations of contingency.

« 2 » Matuszek sees the root of the limits he describes in the opening statement of Luhmann's *Social Systems*: "The following considerations assume that there are systems" (Luhmann 1995: 12). Consequently, if there "are" systems, then contingency, if understood as the horizon of possible continuations of a current situation, is limited by successive operations having the possibility to reference these systems and their environments. However, the existence of systems as it is described throughout the article seems to rely on their temporal stability, or even just their temporal extensiveness, for if the proposed limits are to be effective, this existence has to be primordial knowledge to all observers engaged in situations of double contingency. And vice versa, the existence of limits to contingency thus becomes an a priori for communication. This, however, seems implausible for situations of double contingency. It would force every observation to start with the distinctions mentioned in the article, reality/construction, operation/observation, and system/environment. This would mean that society is a given in any observation made by individuals taking part in a situation of double contingency. Society would be an entity that cannot be escaped in observation, and therefore has to have existence without observation. If this were the case, individuals in such situations could rely on any possible outcome of the situation to at least take society into account. This may be established in retrospect for any operation that does reference society, i.e., for any operation of communication. But that is a tautology. In contingency however, uncertainties and ambiguities remain and suggest that such references cannot be relied on. Take, for example, the situation of the parent addressing a newborn child. The point at which the operations in this situation can successfully reference society, the moment when the child starts to reference its own social identity, is unclear, and often subject to discussion, or even medical consideration, for example in the case of diagnosed autism (cf. Hobson 1995).

« 3 » Luhmann seems to be very careful not to limit the notion of double contingency, especially by using "alter" and "ego" as names for the participants in such a situation:

> ❝The concepts of alter and ego should leave open whether they concern psychic or social systems, and they should leave open whether or not these systems adopt a determinate processing of meaning.❞ (Luhmann 1995: 106)

Society as a whole could not have temporal stability beyond such systems of interaction, were it not for the apparent ability of individuals taking part in them to handle the difference between their personal and social identities (Luhmann 1995: 405). However, as a "socio-psychological" (ibid) formation this capability remains unobservable from within society. How, then, can observers within society deal with this problem?

« 4 » The project of constructivism is facing challenges in the form of ontologies showing up in any statement made by observers. If cognition is entirely observer-dependent, then how can there be a construction transcending the individual observation? Similarly, how can an observer make and indicate a distinction without referencing previous constructions, thereby assuming the stability of the forms used in the selected medium of communication? After all, observations can only be observed in communication, so the forms of expression used when making the statement of an observation in turn need to be recognizable for other observers, if something like second-order observation is to be possible at all. The statement "there are observers" is no less ontological than the statement that "there are systems," especially since in sociological systems theory, both statements are directly connected. Does this mean that statements such as "there is society" or "there is language" are ontological statements as well?

« 5 » Luhmann stresses that social autopoiesis exists only in the individual instances of operations of the social system (Luhmann 2012: 33), i.e., when an observer makes a statement of indication. Taken literally, this is the most radical constructivist approach, as it rules out the ontological existence of entities such as society, functional systems, networks, language, or indeed observers with an identity. If we follow the literal approach for a moment, then all of these entities can only exist within the singular act of actualizing communication, within the act of indicating. An observer can indicate itself, but it has no way of guaranteeing the temporal stability of this self-reference across several subsequent observations. In principle, every single observation is totally free to observe whatever it does, not being bound by any considerations of society, functional systems, language, or consistency with a self-image of an observer. At this

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level, every observation is identical with an individual (in the literal sense of being indivisible in further analysis) observer, and every individual observer is identical with exactly one observation. This freedom makes it seem unlikely that other observers will make indications referencing previous observations. Nevertheless, there seemingly are social systems. Luhmann calls this the "paradox of the probability of the improbable" (Luhmann 2012: 251).

« 6 » The statement about there being systems can be read as an ontological statement, but then, so can be any statement that relies on the ontological nature of language. According to Gregory Bateson (1987: 372), communication was invented as a means to convey the relational-ontological world of one observer to other observers, so it does not come as a surprise that communication cannot escape ontologies. In the end, the statements mentioned here as ontological are statements in communication, made by individual observers, who have no choice other than to rely on the notion of semantic stability they see in language. But Luhmann's sociological approach can be read as an attempt to de-ontologize society, and thereby language. As the successive actualization of communicative events is seen as highly improbable, much of the research program is focused on the investigation of how it does come about, not in the sense of ontological being, but in the sense of being observable to the effect that an individual observer can claim having observed it, with the hope of other observers corroborating this statement.

« 7 » In sociological systems theory, society and language become de-ontologized on the grounds of investigations into expectations (Luhmann 2012: 8, 206, 253). For example, the empirical analyses Luhmann undertakes throughout his *Theory of Society* (notably in Chapter 2; Luhmann 2012: 113–250) do not count on the reliability of statements, but rather investigate how expectations about sequences of statements are established. The notion of such sequences is also observer-dependent: a connection such as action-reaction has to be understood as constructed by an observer, and an observer who has studied other observers will be very careful not to expect an ontological truth in a statement made either by herself

or by others. This has an effect on the possibility of limiting contingency, as postulated in §§36–41: an observer who does not expect all other participants in a situation of mutual contingency to be bound by stable limits of this contingency also does not have to abide by them herself. Rather, she is free to re-interpret them to fit the ontological consistency of her own statements. Limits of contingency, if and when they are recognized, are themselves an ontological construction made by an observer, but in this they are no more or less ontological than any other statement in society. It might be helpful to reconstruct Matuszek's statements made in §§36–41 as a structure of expectations: observers who claim to observe other observers may be analyzed with regard to how they expect contingency to be limited. This change in perspective allows us to view the proposed limits as a social function, which could be close to or even equivalent to the concept of "social immune systems" as described by Luhmann (1995: 403). This view then makes it possible to see the various precautions observers take to reduce the probability of being surprised, i.e., of their expectations not being met, by other statements they observe. Limits become important for the effectiveness of processes in communication, but they require hard work to be kept stable as communicative functions, and can never be relied on to the degree of ruling out unpleasant (or pleasant) surprises.

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Searching and Finding Ontology

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> Upshot · Matuszek's article criticizes Luhmann's systems theory in particular and constructivism in general with respect to philosophical inconsistency caused by some ontological implications of constructivist epistemology. Providing a coherent interpretation of ontology and epistemology is worth the effort in order to solve philosophical problems. However, the question arises of whether philosophical reasoning actually is of any relevance for empirical research. I argue that both Luhmann's operative constructivism and constructivism in general already comply with Matuszek's suggestions.

« 1 » Constructivists have often been concerned with uncovering the ontological assumptions of epistemological realism to criticize its philosophical foundations. In Völker & Scholl (2014), we recently re-interpreted empirical studies about the media coverage of climate change by detecting and deconstructing hidden minimal ontological assumptions in the argumentation of communication scientists who derive normative criticism from the epistemological realism to which they are committed. The aim of our meta-analysis or second-order research was to criticize the *practical* (normative) consequences rather than to enter a *theoretical* (philosophical) debate. Krzysztof Matuszek's target article pursues two different goals. On the one hand the author is interested in a theoretical debate about ontology and how to avoid ontological reasoning in constructivism and systems theory. On the other hand the author searches for more or less hidden ontological remainders in constructivist reasoning in order to solve the problem of philosophical inconsistencies in the constructivist discourse.

« 2 » In my commentary I argue that while Matuszek's argumentation contributes to clarifying constructivist epistemology, his criticism does not have a strong impact on