

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Luhmann, Niklas. *Trust and Power*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017, 216 pages, \$31.95, paper, (9781509519453).

In this latest posthumous publication by Niklas Luhmann, we get two books in one: one book on trust and one on power. The first one was originally released in German in 1968, followed by an extended edition in 1973, while the second was released in 1975. They were later translated into English and published under a single cover in 1979. Christian Morgner and Michael King now offer us a new edition with a new introduction and a revised translation. We should be thankful, for this is a fantastic reading. Each page is filled with brilliant ideas. Don't blink or you'll miss one! It is also a difficult text, although the reader's efforts are well rewarded. Whoever teaches sociological theory should check it out.

Luhmann sees the development of trust as allowing for the reduction of complexity. Luhmann uses the word "complexity" to describe the fact that social actors are interdependent. Since they cannot ignore each other's existence, actors must coordinate themselves in the way they select their respective course of action. Simply put, they must learn to do things together. This does not happen automatically. Reducing complexity does not mean becoming less interdependent but achieving a form of relation that proves to be sustainable amidst the intricacies of social complexity. Actors who trust other actors manage to work as a team (or a choreography of dancers). For Luhmann, the value in this achievement is not moral or ethical – as if he was making a philosophical argument in favor of altruism or cooperation – but "evolutionary," in that the changes in social conditions that coincide with the development of trust will enable further changes.

Moreover, Luhmann conceptualizes trust in opposition with familiarity. Familiarity refers to the features of everyday life that we take for granted (un-reflexive, routine bound). To move beyond this, individuals must engage in long-term interactions with other individuals who could potentially let them down. The pay-off is the capacity to develop more sophisticated forms of social organization, if only because the functioning of these new forms does not require individuals to be perpetually in the presence of each other.

Trust is nothing but a promise. Yet this is enough to set actors on an evolutionary path toward new social experiments and new social outcomes. More precisely, trust can be understood as a mode of action. By bestowing trust on others, we alter the time horizon of our actions: we agree to do things in the present without guarantees about the future. Indeed, others may very well betray our trust. At the same time, others must know that they might be punished for doing that. When actors come to operate within these specific parameters, never-seen-before behavioral patterns are given a chance to arise. These are extended situations of trust where one's course of action is supported – and thereby made possible – by his or her partner's course of action and vice-versa. Although these situations begin with a leap of faith, they later become independent of their initial conditions.

Luhmann also distinguishes personal trust and system trust. The latter includes trust in money and institutions like banks and schools. The mechanisms remain the same, albeit the analysis is no longer limited to relations between persons in flesh and blood. Although systems are not disincarnated – as if they could exist in the absence of human beings – they nonetheless operate anonymously. Luhmann describes this as a positive organizational feature. The point is that systems are not tied to the identity or status of certain actors in the way they function. For example, money as a medium of exchange is indifferent to gender, race, nationality, etc. Hence, through the concept of system trust, the said systems are given a reality of their own.

Although he does not say it like that, Luhmann follows a Darwinian model in that he thinks in terms of blind variation and selective retention, or heterogeneity and the creation of differences, rather than simple causalities. The result is a fascinating account that eschews both “material interest” and “collective norm” as building blocks for social order. Trust deviates from familiarity by establishing a response delay. The secret does not lie in what you do, but in what you don't do – not right away at least! This enables an increase in “degrees of freedom” or “joint articulations” for the purpose of social organization. Put differently, there is a gain in the number of dimensions across which social processes can unfold hereafter.

As with trust, Luhmann conceives power as arising out of a set of specific parameters between actors. Luhmann envisions a dyad involving a power-holder and a power-subject. He imagines a scenario where it is possible for the power-holder to trick the power-subject into avoiding certain actions under the threat of negative sanctions. This is reminiscent

of Foucault's ideas when he speaks of power as "an action upon an action." Moreover, Luhmann makes a distinction, again like Foucault, between power and coercion. The negative sanctions that the power-holder can exercise do not directly target the power-subject – as if the former could coerce the latter at will – but the relation between two. The consequences of these sanctions would be such that the power-subject has more to lose than the power-holder – which is the reason why the power-subject agrees to avoid certain selections in the course of his own action.

The overall effect is not so much a series of privileges for power-holders and obligations for power-subjects, but the constitution of an "ecological niche" within which special conditions prevail. Power reappears as a symbolically generalized communication medium. With this concept, Luhmann explains that social situations can expand beyond face-to-face interactions. As social situations continue to grow, their inner organizing (organization as process) no longer falls into the hands of specific individuals. Accordingly, "symbolically generalized communication medium" turns out to be a redundant formula:

There is "communication" when multiple actors adjust their behavior with one another, thus creating a chain enabling the "transmission of selections" across different sites of social activities.

"Generalization" means erasing the differences between actors and between sites to meet the requirements imposed by this new context.

Likewise, "symbolization" means the invention of symbols adapted to these conditions. Rather than representing something existing prior to them, these symbols constitutes new concepts as abstract material to work with.

All these developments amount to the generation of a "medium" (equivalent to money for instance) presenting individuals with new means of interaction.

Finally, the development of the medium is followed by the development of a code that enforces a binary schematism on all subsequent conjunctures (e.g. formal/informal or lawful/unlawful) and thereby streamlines communication.

There is just not enough space here to do justice to the book's entire content. The chapter on distrust oddly illuminates the cultural and political circumstances of 2019. The remarks directed against Alvin Gouldner (128) are priceless. Granted, the author does not always fully convince. The way he conceives societal evolution as analytical frame will annoy some (although he gives more explanations in other books). Still the sheer originality, the theoretical depth, the sociological insight-

fulness and the intellectual freedom (as in Nietzsche's gay science) are undeniable. Why deprive yourself of the pleasure?

Dalhousie University

Jean-Sébastien Guy

Jean-Sébastien Guy is interested in classical and contemporary social theory. He has written on globalization, Niklas Luhmann's systems theory and relational sociology. He has published in *Current Perspectives in Social Theory*, *Current Sociology*, *European Journal of Social Theory* and *International Review of Sociology*. He is currently working on a book-length manuscript on metric and nonmetric as a new pair of fundamental concepts in sociology (accepted for publication with Palgrave-Macmillan).

Email: jsguy@dal.ca