

“Old Europe” and “the Sociologist” How does Niklas Luhmann’s theory relate to philosophical tradition?¹

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht

Abstract

In this article, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht reflects on the intellectual legacy of Niklas Luhmann and its relations with the Western philosophical tradition.

Keywords

Niklas Luhmann. Social theory. Epistemology.

Few days after November 6th, 1998, the newsroom of the weekly newspaper “Die Zeit” sent me an e-mail informing me of Luhmann’s death. It is evident that we lost a great thinker and author, but we need to be clearer when we ask what we lost with his death. I would like to focus on two aspects that may serve as a guide for this lecture². The first one is: why, in the long term, were German intellectuals forced to occupy themselves with Luhmann’s concepts during the time of his publications, i.e., roughly from 1970 to 1998? Why did the Luhmannian discourse exert such an on the intellectuals of my time? In fact, occupying oneself with Luhmann was inevitable. In a way, Luhmann was for the second half of the 20th century what Hegel had been for the first half of the 19th century in Germany. This has nothing to do with liking or disliking theories, it was, so to speak, impossible to shun them. If we read the publications from the first half of the 19th century, we come to a similar conclusion regarding both Hegel and Luhmann: It was necessary to take a stance on them.

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The second question is why Luhmann was such an extraordinary source of intellectual energy, because this is what he was even for those who were totally against his theory. He would produce sparks, as we say in the United States. In order to get an answer to these two questions, my intention is to first focus – and this would be a first point – on Luhmann’s unique and rather strange self-references, i.e., the way he used to talk about himself – he rarely did it, but when he did, how did it happen? “The Sociologist” in the title of this lecture refers to this. Secondly, I would like to take a step back, assuming an outside perspective, trying to describe Luhmann’s intellectual style, not his theory system, but what we could call Luhmann’s discursive gestures. Finally, I will try very briefly to characterize the deployment of this theory system. In order to do that, I intend to describe the three phases – three “construction phases” between 1970 and 1998 – in this theory construction process. In the fourth part, suggested by the title with the term “old Europe”, I will try to assess how much Luhmann owes to old Europe, in spite of his own rhetoric, in which he always gets away from old Europe, i.e., the Western philosophical tradition.

All this will bring us back to the question on the intellectual energy that emanated from

Luhmann. From this point of view, I will try to explain where this extraordinary intellectual energy had come from – both for his friends and his enemies. I will first discuss Niklas Luhmann’s strange self-references.

When Luhmann talks about the “sociologist” in the sense of a type, I claim that – in spite of the fact that he does not say it so explicitly – he is always talking about himself. I present here a quotation from the book *Archimedes und wir* [Archimedes and us] – a collection of illustrative interviews and a rather sexy reading (LUHMANN, 1987). In one of the interviews, Luhmann was asked if he had ever intended to interpret literary texts or works of art, to what Luhmann answers he has not. His answer is not relevant in this context, but I just want to show how the sociologist comes to speak. Then, to the question if he had ever intended to interpret some work of art, he answers: “I don’t think it’s the task of the sociologist to interpret individual works. If he did, he wouldn’t do it as a sociologist, this would rather only ‘happen’ to me if I became fascinated with something at that time.” (LUHMANN, 1987, p. 77). What I find interesting in this quotation – which is clearly not very significant – is the fact that, at least in Germany, many sociologists do interpret. Sociologists, in a way, have raised (or lowered) the level of hermeneutics, but nevertheless Luhmann

1 This paper was originally published in German with the title “Alteuropa” und “Der Soziologe” Wie verhaelt sich Niklas Luhmann Theorie zur philosophischen Tradition. In: Baecker, Dirk (ed.) Luhmann Lektüren. Berlin, **Kulturverlag Kadmos**, 2010, pp. 71-91.

2 This talk was made without a manuscript by Ulrich Gumbrecht in Freiburg, December, 5th 1999. We print here a transcript of the talk with slight changes, complemented with bibliographical references. [Note by the organizer]

talks about the sociologist, although everyone knows that, in fact, the sociologist is nothing but a self-reference of Niklas Luhmann.

What is curious about this self-reference as a sociologist is that all of us who read him, in fact, read him as a great philosopher, as properly pointed out by philosopher Robert Spaemann in his eulogy to Luhmann at the 1989 Hegel award ceremony. Why is it, then, – and this is not an easy question – that Luhmann so stubbornly insisted on this self-reference as a “sociologist”? Why did he never grow tired of repeating that he was ultimately only interested in a new foundation of the discipline of sociology? Particularly when we consider that, on the one hand, he showed through his conduct that he had never been interested in academic disciplines in general, or in sociology in particular. On the other hand – and this is also a form of self-reference – Luhmann, when talking about the systems theory, does so as if there were thousands of sociologists scattered throughout the world who, in their huge research institutes, would be working on the development of a systems theory, thus constantly representing a certain research status. The introduction of *Social Systems*, for example, gives the impression that the whole world, as a big swarm of bees, would be devoted to the systems theory – when, in fact, there is no such a thing as a systems theory. Of course many people use the concept “system” when, for example, they talk about systems thinking, but a systems theory in all its complexity– this cathedralesque construction

of the systems theory – does not exist as such. Therefore, when Luhmann talks about the systems theory and then mentions some external reference, in fact – and I am not sure if he was aware of that – it is always a self-reference. The systems theory is nothing but – and had no other reference than – the work of Niklas Luhmann. It may have been embarrassing for him to always refer to his own work. In Germany there are many who believe that the systems theory is the object of research internationally, but this is not true.

Thirdly, something similar happens when Luhmann quotes other theorists and never with any kind of introduction, always making readers feel guilty because they usually do not know these quoted authors. Then Luhmann starts and says: “Spencer-Brown states” – Spencer-Brown? I have no clue! What I mean is this: Gotthart Günther, to whom Luhmann is constantly referring to as the canonical inventor of the trivalent logic in fact has not been completely ignored by the history of 20th century logic as I have been told by my colleague philosophers in Stanford; Humberto Maturana, the great visionary biologist in Luhmann’s books, certainly has never been a candidate for the natural sciences Nobel prize, not even for a national Chilean prize; Fritz Heider, who is also frequently quoted by Luhmann, was the author of one single essay on the concept of form – from 1926; Heinz von Foerster was a nice, eccentric and retired engineering scientist. I would also like to mention that my colleagues at the Department of Mathematics in

Stanford see George Spencer-Brown (and I am not exaggerating) as a mathematics poor crazy fellow, but I learned that every renowned institute of sociology in Germany employs at least one Spencer-Brown expert. Therefore, we wonder if all these external references to alleged theory authorities would not rather be permutations of the name Niklas Luhmann.

Finally, there is a prominent external reference Luhmann frequently resorts to in order to get away from it, i.e., to close the self-reference cycle, this is, as all will be able to guess without too much difficulty, the concept of “old Europe” [*Alteuropa*], i.e., the concept “invented” by Luhmann for the philosophical tradition. However, we can admit that it is not too hard to get to this compound term.

Luhmann, at least this is what he explicitly affirms in his texts, wants to be anything but old Europe, i.e., he would rather be Heinz von Foerster or Fritz Heider, but not old Europe. But this external reference also turns into a strange self-reference, because anyone familiar with Luhmann’s texts will clearly recognize that no other intellectual of his generation in Germany was so knowledgeable about the European philosophical tradition and used it as productively as he did.

Now I would like to take two steps back and look at Luhmann from the outside and thus try to

characterize his intellectual style or, so to speak, Luhmann’s external reference. I shall never forget, for example, how Niklas Luhmann in March 1987, in a speech delivered on occasion of the inauguration of the first graduate working group in Human Sciences in Germany – this was at (what an awful designation!) the Higher Education Organization University of Siegen, where I myself worked as a professor - to baffled ministers (among them Jürgen Möllemann, who would later become the executive chief of the soccer team Schalke 04) and the chairman of the German Research Foundation (an enthusiastic member of the study group) who was even more perplexed, recommended that they should never try to find solutions for their intellectual problems, but rather identify them, nurture them and coddle them.

Thus, we face the question of intellectual gestures and how Luhmann himself managed not to find definite solutions. I think there is a number of gestures that explain why Luhmann – and this was really his explicit desire – did not want to find solutions. One of the gestures is, for example, his focus on paradoxes and tautologies, i.e., on rhetoric figures in which two simultaneously present concepts are mutually excluding or two identical concepts that occupy the same system position and thus, due to the fact that they are present at the same time and – figuratively speaking – are struggling for the only place available, they generate tension, restlessness, intellectual energy. Luhmann managed to leave this always open, also making use or irony and self-irony, where that (i.e., the rhetoric

figure) which is being said and written always means at the same time the opposite of what is being explicitly written.

Luhmann managed never to get to the end due to his preference for play on words. I would like to illustrate this with two examples: when he talked about changes of scientific paradigms in reference to T. S. Kuhn, he liked to write: *Paradigm lost*. Behind this expression a more or less evident quotation to Milton's *Paradise lost* is naturally hiding. Therefore, as he made a regular and denotative reference to the scientific paradigm, he was also saying that these "fool" academics and scientists are used to develop an affective and religious relationship with their own paradigms.

I like the second play on words even more. It is found in one issue of the *Spiegel* magazine, which usually deals with anecdotes about prominent personalities. As we know, Luhmann had an administrative career until he was forty-years-old. As a consequence, the management of the Bielefeld University felt a certain respect for Niklas Luhmann. Their employees had not idea of his academic importance, but they knew that he was knowledgeable about administration processes. And as all German professors, particularly in the miserly state of Nordrhein-Westfalen governed by the Social-Democratic Party (SPD), Luhmann had to fill out a list by the end of every month justifying all long distance

calls he had made that had cost over 1.25 German Marks, or whatever the exact amount was. For thirteen years Luhmann, in his very clear handwriting, wrote the letters k.A in the corresponding field [acronym for *keine Angabe*, i.e., nothing to declare]. This was accepted for thirteen years, but then a new administrator was hired by the "phone call control agency" and he did not know that Luhmann had had an administrative career. He then asked at the department office what the abbreviation "k.A." meant, because he wanted to learn its meaning. Luhmann told him it meant "*keine Ahnung*" [I have no idea]. I do not know if after this episode he had to pay for his phone calls.³

This Bielefeld anecdote is interesting because it also shows an oscillation movement. On the one hand, Luhmann takes advantage of his fame as an administration expert and, on the other hand, it seems that he had decided that as a scientist he would not waste time with administrative nonsense and for this reason he had written "k.A".

Another method to produce intellectual energy consisted in the thinking that is called *counter intuitive*. In German there is no vernacular word for that, maybe we could introduce the term "*gegenintuitiv*" to express those intellectual gestures that present phenomena in such a way as they usually do not manifest themselves in day-to-day life. I think Luhmann was the master

3 According to oral information provided by Peter Fuchs to the organizers of this publication, Luhmann had actually to pay a certain amount (not specified).

of counter intuitive aphorism. He describes, for example, in a highly perfidious way, love as a social system or the domestic cat as a biological system or – and this is my favorite – money as the most spiritual of all resources. This is obviously a blow against Marxism. If we then ask ourselves if these gestures of Luhmann’s intellectual style have a common denominator, we find that all these gestures always refer to the fact that a given system position can always be occupied by something different from what is occupying it at the moment. Therefore, in his intellectual gestures Luhmann is constantly using contingency as intellectual energizer. I think that contingency production in his own writings is one of the reasons why they have such an energetic effect, i.e., a contingency which he, as we could read in *Beobachtung der Moderne* [Observing Modernity], considers to represent the “eigenvalue” (Heinz von Foerster) of modern society, i.e., Luhmann generates the awareness that everything can be as it is, but that it could also be different, that it is neither necessary or impossible that phenomena are as they are.

Well, for such a mobile thinking as is Niklas Luhmann’s, it is inevitable that it goes through metamorphoses and this is the third part of my lecture. Next I would like to briefly outline three development phases of the systems theory.

Luhmann’s theory production started like a thunderbolt in 1970, in a conference of

sociologists, during a discussion with Habermas. The thunderbolt was the “environment/system” [Umwelt/System] paradigm. This was, so to speak, the first paradigm, the first paradigm lost. And I say here “environment/system” and not, as people use to say “system/environment”, because the provocation consisted precisely in the allegation that system functions taken from the environment are essential for the structure of the system, i.e., in theoretical terms, function has priority over structure – thus function comes above structure, environment before system. I think that in an implicitly controversial way this was directed against the dominant structuralism at the time, according to which, generally speaking, function was always a consequence of structure, which was considered primary. In his first phase of development, Luhmann reversed this order.

The second provocation of this very early theory phase was the thesis according to which the function of all social systems should be to reduce the complexity of the environment and the reduction of the world’s complexity was precisely what Luhmann, throughout his theory development, has always defined as meaning. But in order to affirm the concept of reduction, Luhmann provoked all intellectuals. This was probably the secret reason why the book from Suhrkamp publishing house, published jointly by Luhmann and Habermas (1971), got the title *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie* [Theory of society or social technology]. In an interview, Luhmann stated that he had never

wanted to be a social technologist. This is why everyone was provoked because until then, the concept of reduction represented to all intellectuals the embodiment of absolute evil. Nothing could be worse than reducing or being reductive. When the concept was suddenly affirmed - although it had not been affirmed as self-difference, but rather as an external reference – all alarms went off.

Roughly ten years later, Luhmann, constantly resorting to Humberto Maturana and later also to the less important Francisco Varela, started to turn his attention to the other side, to the inner side of systems. Systems should be conceived as autopoietic systems, i.e., as closed monads - this is how he himself formulated it in relation to 17th century philosophy – as systems that were blind to the environment and that relate to their environment only through disturbances or through the concept of coupling which, though never fully developed by Luhmann, I consider very interesting.

Therefore, the primary function of these autopoietic systems is no longer a reaction to the environment to become a constant self-reproduction exclusively through elements that emanate from the system itself. In my not very relevant opinion as a non-sociologist, this was the strongest and most complex phase in Luhmann's theory development.

But, finally, there is still a third famous phase which, today, attracts the attention of most

readers and interpreters of Luhmann and the question that brings us to this third phase is: how can autopoietic systems internally produce, i.e., inside themselves, not only self-references – which would be easy –, but also external references, considering that from the autopoietic systems perspective there are no external points of view which they can assume to produce an external reference.

This, then, takes Luhmann to the theory of the observer and of differentiation, to invention or, rather, to the description of the hero of the later theory phase, i.e., of the second-order observers, who are observers who have the privilege to observe themselves in the act of observing – we could also say they are cursed, I myself tend to say they are cursed, because it is an awful thing to observe oneself in the act of observing, not being able to take any distance from the object of their observation, who will rather always be part of the object of their observation and, thus, are aware of the contingency of all their differentiations and their image of the world. We could also say that nobody has ever embodied the second-order observer in such an extreme form as Niklas Luhmann in his third phase – except maybe for Friedrich Schlegel, who was Luhmann's role model of the second-order observer.

I come now to the fourth question: what is the relationship between this history of theory and the

tradition of Western philosophy? Luhmann does not make it easier for us to look for an answer because, firstly, he never answers this question in interviews or just does so as Humberto Maturana or Spencer-Brown do and, secondly, because he tries to constantly be away from old Europe as something that is different, *completely* different from his own theory. However, all Luhmann's readers intuitively know that this difference, in fact, could not have been as dramatic as Luhmann presented it. For this reason, I suggest that there are at least three main candidates to continue Luhmann's work with the philosophical tradition of "old Europe".

The sequence in which these three candidates are presented is random and the sequence chosen here is a tribute to the *genius loci* of Freiburg, because the first I mention is Edmund Husserl and the tradition of phenomenology.

There are at least three central elements to Luhmann's work that are hardly imaginable without a previous phenomenological tradition *à la Husserl*. Just as in Luhmann systems are blind in relation to the environment, so is consciousness in Husserl (1). And this is precisely the great achievement made by Husserl who, in his first phenomenology writings criticizes the natural image of the world and natural scientists (with the purpose of causing controversy) who followed the principle of, as North-American anthropologists

say, "going out and watch the birds fly", knowing that the world of things – of external references, as Luhmann would put it – is always already transcendent. 2. When Luhmann, as a consequence of this premise (according to which systems are blind in relation to the environment), turns his attention to systems as autopoietic systems, second phase of the theory, we can then say that Husserl also develops a philosophy of consciousness as an autopoietic system. Husserl did not use this rather insignificant term; but all his terminology, all the metaphors of the flow of consciousness, this detailed description – by means of the *epoché* – of the processes of meaning formation – which is a description of consciousness as an autopoietic system – have a very strong parallel with Luhmann. Luhmann returns to this issue, not only when he describes the psychological system – the Luhmannian term for consciousness – but also when he describes social systems internally in a way that is so similar to the way Husserl described consciousness. A third parallel is that the key product of the autopoietic mechanisms is, naturally, meaning. Luhmann's theory, just like Husserl's and only as radical as Husserl's theory, focus on the concept of meaning. Not even Luhmann would have objected to it.

My second candidate to continue with the old Europe in Niklas Luhmann's theory system is Hegel. Like in Husserl and Luhmann, the concept

of meaning also occupies a central position in Hegel's philosophy. Hegel still calls meaning – in a less “cool” manner - as spirit but, as in Luhmann and Husserl, in Hegel the spirit will always be the winner in any match. In Luhmann, the spirit can never lose either, for this reason, even the economic system ends up being a spiritual system.

Secondly, both in Hegel and Luhmann, in fact, in the whole philosophy of the old Europe of the 19th century, the temporal dimension has the connotation of a history of progression. As we know, Hegel calls this history of progression self-discovery, self-reflection of the spirit; in Luhmann, it is called, in a seemingly more technological way, system differentiation.

Thirdly, and this seems to me to be the specific and really significant parallel with Hegel: Just like the self-discovery of the spirit in Hegel, Luhmann's system differentiation also aims at an epistemological target, i.e., system differentiation is the historical precondition of the insight into the condition of the second-order observation. To the same extent that system differentiation progresses, so increases the awareness related to the fact that an observation is only possible from a specific perspective. In other words: I think that for Luhmann it is historically and systemically unconceivable to imagine that a stratified society could have an insight of the structure of the second-order observer.

After Hegel and Husserl, I now mention hermeneutics as my third candidate to continue the work of Niklas Luhmann in relation to the tradition of old Europe. The meaning of the whole metaphysics of the second-order observer is summed up in the basic and trivial knowledge of hermeneutics, according to which any experience is due to a specific perspective, thus being contingent. Therefore, I would not hesitate to say – but my relationship with hermeneutics is a disturbed one which, undoubtedly, has oedipal reasons – that the third phase in Luhmann's theory, the one related to the second-order observer, is nothing but hermeneutics with modernized terminology. I hope readers will be upset by this statement. With so much of the tradition of old Europe contained in Luhmann's work, we ultimately ask, after all, what was the great provocation that so often made us hold our breath. I will not say that this provocation does not exist. There is a type of lecture that starts very promisingly and then just shows everything that has already been said elsewhere.

The question related to the provocation takes us back to the question on the reasons from which radiated, and maybe still radiates, an intellectual energy. Well, if we exclude from Luhmann's work all the multiple influences of old Europe, what remains as a difference, a claim to originality,

is a negative diagnosis. Originality is a blank space, i.e., the programmatic and consequent omission of a self-reference for humans, i.e., the omission of the concept of subject, of subjectivity or any other term that replaces this concept. This applies to Luhmann at two different levels. There is not, as I would like to stress again in a rather programmatic manner, any concept of subject and in his theory there is not either any substitute for the concept of subject; in a way, this represents an epistemological desire. It is interesting that Luhmann, also in his interviews, does not allow others to introduce him as a subject, i.e., as an author. I quote an excerpt from *Archimedes und wir*, where Luhmann is asked if any autobiographical experience had found its way into his theory work. As a second-order observer he should answer: Naturally. But he says: No.

Luhmann answers: “For me, this problem simply does not exist. It is possible that I am blind in this regard, but I do not ask myself if I should universalize my personal reasons. The only thing that interests me is the objective problem [this is very strange for someone who has defined himself as a constructivist]. The fact that I am the author leads to an overestimation of what “I” contribute, when, in fact, I feel carried away by a fabric of possibilities in which I randomly connect this to that”.

We can find here a nervous refusal – calling it erotic would be, maybe, an exaggeration – of the

subjective position, but there is no subjective position of the theory and Luhmann does not allow people to attribute to him a creative position as an author; constantly making an effort to construct his own theory.

To the frequently asked question, why had he omitted the concept of subject or, more precisely, a central self-reference for the human being, Luhmann offered several answers. What I find interesting is that these answers are, in a very unique way, incoherent. He always finds an answer when asked a question and each of them is, in a way, plausible, but there is no point of convergence. I mention some of these answers in a rather open sequence. Luhmann said, for example, that the concept of subject should be omitted because it does not correspond to the contingent conditions of the modern world, because it suggests that it is still possible to observe from a specific point of view, which is actually no longer the case. For me, this argument is not very convincing, because one can multiply the concept of subject and then say that different subjects see the world differently.

Then he showed that – and this in my view is the strongest argument – conceptually, the concept of subject renders the concept of intersubjectivity impossible and, therefore, also the concept of communication, because when subjects are formulated in the sense of monads, as is traditionally done, it is impossible to think of communication between them. There

are two beautiful formulations by Luhmann on this subject. One of them says: “Either inter or subjectivity, but not intersubjectivity”. The other one is found in the beginning of the essay entitled: “What is the role of consciousness in communication?”, where he offers this beautiful counter intuitive formulation: “General convention assumes that human beings – please take note, not consciousnesses – communicate with one another. Therefore, it is very easy to show that this is totally impossible”.

As an answer to the question why he omits the central self-reference of human beings, the concept of subject, Luhmann also says – and this is what interests me most here – that with the omission of the concept of subject or of a general concept for human beings, his intention is to avoid or pretend that overall ethical claims are made on behalf of human beings or mankind. It is Luhmann’s phobia against any ethical prescription. And there is that beautiful statement: “I know one single maxim in ethics, avoiding ethics”. I share here Luhmann’s opinion that it is indeed dangerous to define any prescription on behalf of mankind.

But what is Luhmann offering instead? In Luhmann, this void, which used to be occupied by the subject, is now occupied by the unstable coupling of three systems: the social system – human beings cannot be considered without a social system -, the psychological system, i.e., consciousness, and the biological system,

the body, which by no means was Luhmann’s favorite concept. Sometimes he uses it; usually, however, he does not, because this theory is so spiritual. The fact that this coupling, as a replacement of the concept of subject, is so unstable relates to what I consider to be the main reason of this position, the reason Luhmann never expressed and, maybe, one he was not fully aware of. This is my main thesis: the void at the center of the theory does not enable the completion of the theory by one final thought, thus preserving its dynamism.

This corresponds exactly to the reason, mentioned by the important philosopher Robert Spaemann in his eulogy, why Luhmann (whom he admires as a philosopher) defines himself so insistently, persistently and stubbornly as a sociologist, and not as a philosopher. Spaemann asks: isn’t Luhmann, in fact, a philosopher, a modern Hegelian? (This question is, actually, valid and, to my joy, Spaemann mentioned Hegel too). And he continues: “This thesis would render him harmless” (that is, in fact, he is not a philosopher). “Philosophy consists of final thoughts’, to use an expression by Dieter Henrich. In this sense, philosophy seems naïve, because none of its thoughts has ever proven to be unsurpassable, but surpassing has always meant surpassing a final thought with another final thought that was understood as closure. Instead of final thought we could also say: Thought of the absolute. When I describe Luhmann’s thinking as a challenge of philosophy, I do so for the following

reason: Luhmann has always consistently rejected any final thought”.

Later, Spaemann argues that this would be the reason why Luhmann ironically refers to himself as a sociologist, and by saying that Spaemann assumes rather optimistically that sociologists do not have any final thoughts. But this is certainly the reason why the central concept of subject does not exist in Luhmann.

The absence of a final or last thought, the resistance against this temptation is, as I have already pointed out, what really preserves a difference between the old Europe tradition and Luhmann’s theoretical stance. It is this refusal of the final thought that enables Luhmann to look at the tradition of old Europe with an alienating look, one that generates counter intuitivity. The energy in Luhmann’s thinking was due to the absence of the subject, to the counterintuitive. I use the past tense here not only because Luhmann died a year ago, but also, and above all, because I believe that in his third and last phase, Luhmann’s theory fell into the “offside trap” and stagnated: I think that, in terms of the autopoietic tradition of Luhmann’s theory, this trap was the second-order observer. I do not think I have to justify with too many words my claim that the second-order observer, in spite of all resistance it has been met so far is, after all, a variant of the concept of subject. Luhmann explicitly insists in this refusal of not introducing a subject thinking, but it is evident that the second-order observer is a classic subject. It is

an observer who wants distance, but cannot have it. It is an observer without a body, which is very important for the concept of subject and it is an observer with the innate capacity of self-reflection, i.e., a profoundly classic subject in the sense of old Europe. I think it is equally evident when I claim that there is nothing less counter intuitive in the world of philosophy than a second-order observer. Therefore, here too Luhmann would have involuntarily betrayed his own theory. There is nothing less counter intuitive than the knowledge that the world view of the observer depends always and inevitably on the differentiations used by him. Therefore, I want to close this lecture by saying that we should forget as fast as possible the last phase of the development of Luhmann’s theory, the metaphysics of the second-order observer, his differentiation theory, if we want to continue enjoying participating in the energy of his thinking even after Niklas Luhmann’s death.

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**“A velha Europa” e “o Sociólogo”
Como se relaciona a teoria de
Niklas Luhmann à tradição
filosófica?**

Resumo

Neste artigo, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht reflete acerca do legado intelectual de Niklas Luhmann e suas relações com a tradição filosófica ocidental.

Palavras-chave

Niklas Luhmann. Teoria social. Epistemologia.

**“La vieja Europa” y “el sociólogo”
Como se relaciona la teoría de
Niklas Luhmann a la tradición
filosófica?**

Resumen

En este artículo, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht reflexiona sobre el legado intelectual de Niklas Luhmann y su relación con la tradición filosófica occidental.

Palabras claves

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