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Luhmann's Predecessors and His Theory of Society

Luhmann'ın Öncülleri ve Toplum Teorisi

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ABSTRACT

Niklas Luhmann is one of the most important social scientists of the last century. He wrote a great many and high-quality works that stimulated social research. Despite this, Luhmann has not received the recognition he deserves in Turkey. The following article is an attempt to present Niklas Luhmann's systems theory. For this, his predecessors are first introduced; these are Thomas Hobbes, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and Talcott Parsons. Then, Luhmann's model of society in the triangle of system, environment, and communication media is discussed. It is shown that Luhmann conceptually departed from the idea of culture, values, norms, and the individual. Instead of them, he let the system guide him as an independent entity. Instead of them, he proposes the function of symbolically generalized communication media for the stability of society. By society, Luhmann does not mean the concrete society but the semantics of this society, that is, the society as an object of the social sciences.

Keywords: Communication, double contingency, social order, systems theory

ÖZ

Niklas Luhmann, geçen yüzyılın en önemli sosyal bilimcilerinden biridir. Sosyal araştırmayı teşvik eden çok sayıda yüksek kaliteli eser yazmıştır. Buna rağmen Luhmann Türkiye'de hak ettiği takdiri görmemiştir. Bu makale, Niklas Luhmann'ın sistem teorisini sunma girişimidir. Bunun için öncelikle öncülleri tanıtılmaktadır. Bunlar: Thomas Hobbes, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim ve Talcott Parsons'tır. Ardından Luhmann'ın sistem, çevre ve iletişim araçları üçgenindeki toplum modeli tartışılmaktadır. Luhmann'ın kavramsal olarak kültür, değerler, normlar ve birey fikrinden vazgeçtiği gösterilmiştir. Onların yerine Luhmann, sistemin kendisini bağımsız bir varlık olarak yönlendirmesine izin vermektedir. Ayrıca Luhmann toplumun istikrarı için kültürü değil de sembolik olarak genelleştirilmiş iletişim medyalarının işlevlerini önerir. Luhmann toplum derken somut toplumu değil, bu toplumun anlambilimini, yani sosyal bilimlerin bir nesnesi olarak toplumu kastetmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sistem Teorisi, İletişim, Sosyal Düzen, Çifte Durumsallık

Introduction

In this case, too, Thomas Hobbes is the lynchpin for a start on systems theory. Hobbes placed the tension between the differentiation of the social structure and its legitimacy at the center of the philosophical discourse, in which until then the Aristotelian world view of a perfection and blessedness both considered natural had dominated. Hobbes asked how social order is possible despite selfishly acting actors (Hobbes, 1881, chap. xiii; cf. Parsons, 1949, pp. 89–95). In his own answer, he contrasted the state of nature with the state or contract. He stated that in the state of nature everyone must assume the worst, for which they arm themselves to forestall others, making the war of all against all inevitable (Hobbes, 1651, p. 78). How can the actors create an order, a legal situation, despite these conditions of trust improbability, in which they voluntarily and mutually grant each other rights and obligations and also submit to them unconditionally? Who should watch over it and how? Hobbes found the answer in the contract of submission of all to the Leviathan, who is not part of the contract and can therefore watch and rule over everything (Hobbes, 1881, cap. xvi).

A second basis for systems theory was provided by Emile Durkheim, whose understanding of social order coincided with Hobbes' position in that, according to Durkheim, the stability of social order can be explained by common norms that are stored in the collective memory of the community itself and are capable of motivating even egoistically oriented individuals to submit to society. What Hobbes

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called Leviathan was that what Durkheim saw in norms early in his career (Durkheim, 1976, 1981a). Durkheim in this phase treated society as a phenomenon independent of individual affections, preferences, and intentions (1991). He therefore defined society as a reality *sui generis* (Durkheim, 1981b, p. 36) and a sociological fact as a largely determinative mode of action, capable of dominance and a life of its own (Durkheim, 1976, p. 114). In *Suicide*, Durkheim shows how the norms in tightly woven communities can motivate individuals to the total submission of society so that they are willing to give up their fundamental right to life for the good of society (1983). The other side of this rationality is that society can motivate individuals to defend themselves, but for the flag of the fatherland, or, for example, to allow the society homicide in wartime (Durkheim, 1983, p. 246). The facts make it clear to Durkheim that society as such has agency, the ability to act, and the power over individuals (Durkheim, 1967, p. 94).

On the other hand, Durkheim is also one of the first critics of Hobbes. In his last creative period, he turned away from the old position and found that not everything is "contractual by contract" (Durkheim, 1988, p. 267) and that the preservation of social order does not require a leviathan that separates individuals from obligated to obey the desires, goals, and norms of society (Durkheim, 1991, p. 287 f, 302 f). In his late work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, he assumed a dual nature of man. Accordingly, people live in a profane and a sacred world with the corresponding norms (Durkheim, 1981b, pp. 295–297, 468–469).

In modern societies, the masks of the profane world are replaced by more abstract symbols such as flags, tribe by nation, and religious norms by law (Durkheim, 198b1, p. 283–285, p. 302–305, p. 466–471). Consequently, he studied abstract symbols, first analyzing their function in their infancy, in their primitive forms (Durkheim, 1981b, p. 20). As Hobbes assumed, individuals let themselves be driven more and more by their egoistic motives and, contrary to Hobbes' demands, are less and less bound to obedience by external obligations and less and less in total obedience. From this, Durkheim developed the hypothesis that not only society, moral orientation, ethics as the science of moral questions, the legal system, but also that which deviates from it, is opposed to it, become more rational, more sophisticated, more complex, and more abstract (Durkheim, 1967, p. 96, 1981b, pp. 20–21, 306, 469–470, 1988, pp. 434–435, 1991, pp. 41–42, 83, 169; cf. Parsons, 1951, pp. 169–170; Parsons & Shils, 1962, pp. 140–142; Habermas, 1981, pp. 119–141, 222, 257).

As a result, social stability is based less and less on a sacred value system, on religiously conceived Protestant ethics, on the binding power of society, and more and more on the division of labor on the basis of which the actors work together to effectively defend their particular economic interests, show solidarity, or enter into cooperation within the framework of contract law/contractual solidarity (Durkheim, 1988, pp. 256–258, 1991, pp. 237–238, 287). Thanks to the division of labor in society, individuals, firstly, subject their actions within an organization to commonly developed norms, like the statues of a corporation, rather than themselves and/or a historical figure, like the Leviathan-type king, and secondly, they are allowed to do so pursuing an egoistic calculation of utility without coming into conflict with the norms of society, which in turn are rationalized for this purpose.

The third support is Max Weber, who continued exactly at this point; Weber also examined the rationalization processes and spoke in his sociology of religion of a "hard as steel shell," of "experts without spirit, hedonists without heart" (Weber, 1986, pp. 202–203). He appears here not only as a sociologist, but in his concepts also as a philosopher. His pessimism on the philosophical level turns into euphoria in Weber's sociology as soon as he turns from his society of science to his ethical community. In his studies on Protestant ethics, he turns to the cultured human being in the abstract, philosophical sense and states that not every culture motivates individuals to enter into contractual legal relationships but only that culture which addresses the question of theodicy, the problem of justifying unjust social relationships the reference to God, rationalized into a work ethic of the Protestant kind of capitalist accumulation in this world. From Weber's point of view, the question of the reasons for the stability of the social order is to be found in the ability of a community's culture to determine whether or not it is able to motivate individuals to obey through appropriate, rationalized norms. Weber treated binding norms as ideal-typical behavior patterns of a culture (X, p. 91–105).[1]

After all, Talcott Parsons is one of Niklas Luhmann's most important predecessors. According to Parsons, not only Hobbes, but also Durkheim's and Weber's positions deal with the most important question in social science, namely how social order is possible despite the divergent interests of the actors (Parsons, 1949, pp. 89–95, 1951, pp. 36–37, 118). From Parsons' point of view, the comparison of social norms and individual preferences is about the question of how, given the fact that social stability in modern societies can no longer be attributed to naturalness in the sense of a sacred order, right from the start the anticipated tensions, conflicts, and improbabilities can be understood as part of a disorder (i.e., as the other side of the order) without risking the collapse of society as a whole (Parsons, 1968, pp. 429–441). Since, in view of the pluralistic forms of life in modern societies, there are not only sacred, socially induced norms, but also individual norms and concepts of order that partly exist side by side despite their divergence, Parsons shifts the analytical unit of cultural norms from the societal level to the level of the individual, and here the first question arises: what is the connection between cooperation and conflict? When does an individual cooperate and when not? One answer is that there, where is disappointment in expectation, there is also conflict (Parsons, 1951, pp. 1–15; Parsons & Shils, 1962, pp. 3–30, 100–102, 159–161).

There are not only religious reasons for this, but a number of factual reasons and occasions, which are comparable to each other. An actor in the sense of the sender A (ego) expects a certain action from actor B in the sense of the receiver (age). This interaction pattern, which appears to be stable at first glance, becomes unpredictable in its complexity and riskiness as soon as the assumed linearity is interrupted, for example, by unexpected events, intentional interventions, or normatively higher demands on oneself and/or on the other person (Parsons & Shils, 1962, pp. 3–30; Parsons, 1951, pp. 2–3; Luhmann, 2005, pp. 29–40). As a result of this pressure to increase differences, rationalization, and complexity, not only norms are needed but also organizations (home, school, company, and so on) that make the norms more effective.

1 References are removed to avoid revealing the identity of the author.

Conflicts in premodern societies could somehow be settled by referring to higher norms. This logic fails in functionally differentiated societies. Where sacred norms binding all individuals do not exist, where expectations are not reciprocal, and where binding hierarchies and/or asymmetries cannot be assumed, the unit of analysis does not have to reflect society's expectations of the individual or vice versa but rather the expectation system itself, in which different actors and norm systems are involved depending on the constellation.

In other words; hitherto the actions of an actor in the object world have been easier to analyze (Parsons, 1951, pp. 14, 15, 105). If, on the other hand, the representatives from country X meet with those from country Y, they will not represent their own country but that of their respective country. The same applies to organizations of any kind. However, although each actor, each system, has its own system of expectations with different parameters regarding future interactions, the communication between ego and alter, between two systems, remains permanent despite a whole range of alternatives. Parsons calls this expectation pattern based on reciprocity under uncertainty double contingency (Parsons, 1951, pp. 22–29, 46–47, Parsons, 1968, pp. 436–437; Parsons et al., 1953, pp. 35–37, 1962, pp. 8, 17–18).

Thus, instead of an explanation based on common norms, Parsons proposed an explanation based on factual logic itself. For Parsons, norms inherently bind more than they actually can. In this respect, Parsons treats norms in the sense of Durkheim and Weber as sources of social innovation and as reasons for communicative de-stability (Parsons, 1949, pp. 43–87, 698–700). However, this explanation needs to be expanded by also considering systemic media (money and power) as reasons for actions. Even within a modern culture, individuals are motivated to obey by internalizing the relevant norms through socialization and education. Parsons counts "reinforce ment-extinction, inhibition, substitution, imitation and identification" among the mechanisms of socialization that are conceptually presented in a tensional relationship to each other in their respective executions (1951, pp. 143, 145–148).

Discussion

In contrast to Parsons, Luhmann no longer explains the stability of social order with socialization but rather with these communication media themselves (Luhmann, 1997, pp. 316–318). According to Luhmann, the stability of social order does not require the internalization of social norms, but it is also possible with externally motivating avoidance of communication. In this respect, the modernization, rationalization, and differentiation, that is, the increase in complexity, do not represent a motive for a lack of clarity but only good reasons for the creation of paradoxes that stimulate innovations (Luhmann, 1997, p. 134). In doing so, as soon as people ultimately decide in favor of cooperation and/or conflicts on the basis of their values in their actions by announcing their yes and/or no to a question, these media can also perceive the same function of language in that they too bundle the answers (reactions) into a very specific decision, that is, code them in binary: 0/1, yes/no, have/not have, power/no power, right/no right, love/no-love (Luhmann, 1997, pp. 205–209, 473–476).

Parsons explained the stability of communication under the concept of double contingency with the socially generated expectation system. Based on Durkheim and Weber, Parsons explained the order of expectations with the internalization of cultural patterns. Through socialization and the assumption of roles in society, individuals stabilize the social order through their respective orientation. Luhmann gave up this connection; instead of the actions of an individual, communication should be viewed as the elementary unit of a sociological analysis (Luhmann, 2005, p. 20). Because without communication, there would not even be human life (Luhmann, 2005, p. 29). Instead of the individual, Luhmann had to ascribe the uniqueness to the social systems and thus also to them the reflective, rational thinking and acting (Luhmann, 1997, p. 868).

In this context, Luhmann refers to Immanuel Kant's work *Critique of Pure Reason* and there more precisely to *On the Schematism of Pure Intellectual Concepts* (Luhmann, 1997, pp. 176–180). At this point, he accuses Kant of shifting the subject–object problem from a temporal to a factual dimension (Luhmann, 1997, p. 869). Since Kant intended to solve this subject–object problem with the means of subjectivity, he placed the problem in a relation to the subject environment/outside world (Luhmann, 1997, p. 870). The subject here is simply a "semantic figure," which means that the difference between self-reference and external reference, between distinction and designation, has to be reduced to its function (Luhmann, 1997, p. 872). Accordingly, (reflexive) thinking is not a characteristic of man, especially since he owes it to his socialization in a society that may be imposed on him. If individuality means uniqueness, then society comes closest to it. Because society alone is a subject with its own subjects and at the same time society alone, that is, without another society, represents its own society, it needs neither subjectivity nor intersubjectivity. Only in society is communication about communication possible. Here alone, the universal generalizes itself. The conclusion is that, like the subject, every action of society creates a distinction between itself and the other, system and environment (Luhmann, 1997, pp. 60–66, 874). Consequently, individuality should not be in the "intersubjectivity" of the person or in the social consensus, socialization, discourse, and so on but rather in the autopoiesis of society (Luhmann, 1997, p. 874; cf, Maturana et al., 1980).

Communication Media

Since Luhmann dispenses with recourse to values, consensus, and the distinction between object and subject in explaining communication and the social order, he cannot, like Parsons, rely on socialization and the roles learned in society. Instead, he relies on the systemic media/symbolically generalized communication media[2], such as property/money, love, law, truth, and power, which can still calculate with acceptance probabilities despite "less unlikely communications" (Luhmann, 2005, p. 33). Parsons had already treated power, money, and value obligations under symbolically generalized media of communication. In their logic, these media are binary

2 For the concept of communication media, see Parsons, Talcott, 1969; *Politics and Social Structure*. New York: Free Press. / Talcott Parsons, 1975; Social Structure and Symbolic Media of Interchange. In: Peter M. Blau, ed.; *Approaches to the Study of Social Structure*. p. 94-120. New York. / David A. Baldwin, 1971; „Money and Power." *The Journal of Polities*, Vol. 33 (3; 578-614. / Jürgen Habermas, 1980; Handlung und System -Bemerkungen zu Parsons` Medientheorie. In: Wolfgang Schluchter (Hrsg.; *Verhalten, Handeln und System: Talcott Parsons' Beitrag zur Entwicklung der Sozialwissenschaften*. p. 68-105. Frankfurt am Main.

coded. Based on Parsons' communication theory, Luhmann lists three communication media from the genesis: language, thanks to which communication leaves the room and which generates misunderstandings as part of communication. The second medium is dissemination media such as writing. Finally, he includes the already mentioned symbolically generalized communication media, to which he adds love and truth (Luhmann, 1997, pp. 339–358, 2005, pp. 32–35).

These media operate at the societal level but have the same function as everyday language in everyone's life. They are thus the natural languages of the social system (Parsons, 1951, pp. 6–9). Just as the ego (sender) communicates something to the alter (receiver) thanks to natural everyday language, in the communication it refers to itself, to the reasons for the communication, expects acceptance and/or rejection, both reveals and conceals the reasons for the communication social systems with the symbolically generalized communication media can also take on the same function. Luhmann proposes the following overview for all communications (Luhmann, 1997, p. 336).

What exactly did Luhmann achieve with this overview? Luhmann wants to explain the problem of double contingency by first defining communication as the elementary unit and second starting to analyze communication from the system point of view. Social interactions, actions, can therefore be better understood, analyzed, and systematized through such a reduction, in that everything is viewed from the perspective of the system itself and everything is coded binary from this point of view. Luhmann proposes a system, a second order, with which facts can be depicted and understood analogously to reality but is more than concrete reality itself. For this, he proposes the concept of society.

First of all, *experience* can be translated with passive observing and *action* with the active decision-making. From this logic, Luhmann establishes with his Table 1 that in field 1 the system governs on an incentive from the environment and he therefore calls this incentive truth or values, since, as Durkheim had worked out, historically, evolutionarily all systems, that is, structuring institutions, on the basis of religious ideas, that is, truth and values in the sense of an order with a reference to these religious, sacred authorities. For Luhmann, truth and values are normative concepts that do not belong to the system itself but to the environment. However, since he wants to look at communication starting from systems and here the system reacts to communication and does not act, does not initiate, he counts these as secondary phenomena, that is, as part of experience. The system acts and the environment reacts, that is, is passive, which is why the term experience. Accordingly, it is the system and the environment that act and decide whether something is true or false. Because the system encodes the truth in binary form (true or false), it can also use this selection to motivate the desired action. The result is experience and not action (Luhmann, 1997, pp. 339–340). The same also applies to values; their function is also to offer the actor an orientation—internally, in that the actor does not allow anyone to question his judgments, and externally, in that he generalizes them. "Values are the medium for an assumption of commonality that restricts what can be said and demanded without determining what should be done" (Luhmann, 1997, p. 343). The system alone can determine something, that means to act.

A similar starting point is given in field 2, with the difference that in this case the initiator is the system, even if the initiative was triggered by an environmental incentive. The beloved is the object of love. The system of love would also exist without the beloved one. But the loved one would not be a lover, or the lover would not be a lover, without love as a socially constituted system. What brings the two together, but also separates them, is the system of love itself (Luhmann, 1982). If the one who wants to be loved does not communicate according to the symbolic characteristics of the corresponding system of love, all his attempts for a communication would have failed. Only when the actor initiates an action according to the specifications of the system can communication take place despite all possible improbabilities. Only when the ego attaches itself to the actions of the alter, for which the ego must know the expectation system of the alter and want to act accordingly, can it also expect the possible consent of the alter. To make the system to work, in society symbolic acts of love are stylized, encoded and produced in the actions of the actors; getting to know each other, the first vacation together, the marriage proposal, the wedding and the divorce - all these actions are provided for in the social system, but also highly formalized communication (Luhmann, 1997, p. 346). This is used to practice, to try out whether the initiated action corresponds to the expected pattern or not.

On the other hand, field 3 is about an initiative of the system, with which the actors are motivated to a certain experience, that is, to an action. The action motivation is of course not actually made, but only communicated with the corresponding new media. Money and art have the property in common that they can be produced infinitely without being used up. On the contrary, the more money, the richer; the more art, the higher the probability of acquaintance and attention. On the other hand, the difference between property/money and love, truth, values, and art is that the ego itself wants to acquire property/money from alter (Luhmann, 1991). The question is, how should the interest in alter property be decoupled from the ego without breaking off communication? Because if the solution to the problem of double contingency lies in the functioning of the symbolically generalized communication media, as Luhmann proposes, then he must be able to justify what contribution the functions of property, money, make to the stability of the social order, that is, the social system as a whole. Especially since those actors who want to preserve the existing system of property and money are in the minority compared

Table 1.
Constellations of Experience and Action According to Luhmann

Ego Alter	Experience	Action
Experience	Alter Experience Egos Experience Truth, Values [1]	Alter Experience Egos Act Love [2]
Action	Alter Action Egos Experience Property/Money, Art [3]	Alter Action Egos Act Power/Law [4]

to those who want it, the question arises, "why should they keep quiet even though they are in the majority?" (Luhmann, 1997, p. 348). So why are not there any revolutions, although only a minority governs, or how can social stability be possible despite the seemingly many upheavals?

Historically, according to Luhmann's answer, property was created first. Like property, money also serves as a symbolic sign of the unequal distribution of scarce goods (Luhmann, 1997, p. 349). With the transformation of property into money, the function of the field, the garden, the forest, the house, and so on can be abstracted and expanded to all forms of scarcity. Actors can use the money to buy fields, houses, authors, jewellery, corporations, universities, islands, countries, etc. and only invest the same object in a different combination with the sale, without being tied to a location or object. Money enables structural and functional de-coupling and thus motivates the actors to experience, i.e. to do; put up new buildings, build new airplanes, found new churches, companies, universities, etc.

The same function, experience, also makes art possible. Art wants to arouse astonishment, admiration, and attention. At the same time, this assumes that society has established a world of admiration and attention. In this social world, art has the function of creating an overabundance of possible experiences in the sense of "reactivating switched-off possibilities" (Luhmann, 1997, p. 352). Like money, art is a system that specializes in the function of allowing the actors to experience social reality as a fiction, as a possibility, in that actors dramatize social reality, present it according to an ideology, that is, create their own reality.

Finally, field 4 shows the communication between two systems. Here, too, Luhmann depicts the historical process for the first time; historically, law went back to politics, to power. The king and/or the prophet determined what is right and wrong. In fact, the kings, with their mighty arms, also had the law on their side. With Hobbes, the power of the king was replaced by the contract with the people (Luhmann, 1997, p. 35). In the meantime, however, the law has established itself as a system of its own, so that it can dictate to politics how it wants it to be. Similar to money, power and law also generate or motivate the actors to experience through the abstraction/expansion of possible courses of action. Just as the natural language offers yes/no possibilities, and a person decides for or against something, the money does not exclude a state of over-indebtedness and/or bankruptcy, and there is also a moment of powerlessness, no power, in the constitution of power. The same applies to the law; there can be no right without the state of injustice. What is more, these two media can be fused into a unity, for example into a rule of law, in which right and wrong are part of a rule of law established through a joint decision-making proses, called democracy (Luhmann, 1997, p. 718). Just as property money, power can strengthen right. The preceding yes or no and good/bad decisions culminate in a single response.

This is the systems-theoretical description of the transition of power from absolutism to the rule of law. With this abstraction, a new constellation of expectations expectation is generated. Before the differentiation of law from politics, the king could command how things should be done. The addressees of power only had to know what he wants in order to get what they wanted. With the changeover to the social order in the sense of Luhmann, the expectation of expectation also shifts. So, no one can know what the society of power would want (Luhmann, 1997, pp. 357–358).

Conclusion

Three conclusions can be drawn. First, Luhmann continued the sociologically central questions of Hobbes, Durkheim, and Weber du Parsons by firstly placing communication at the center of his research and secondly using media such as money, power, law, love, and so on to a much greater extent for the actions of social systems. Luhmann wants to explain social systems from their own logic. According to this, social systems in functionally differentiated societies assume the function of communication that was expected of concrete people in premodern societies. In terms of ethnomethodology, the social order resembles a taxonomy which, as a closed system of terms, gives the actors certain options for action and not others. Instead of drives and instincts as in animals, humans delegate this function to social institutions and norms such as marriage, blood-relative relationships, education, law, and social system itself (Gehlen, 1950; Luhmann, 1997, p. 362; Schelsky, 1970).

Second, Luhmann, based on Maturana et al. (1980), assume an autopoietic system, according to which each operation takes place only within this system and communication with other systems takes place via their function of loose coupling (Luhmann, 1997a, pp. 92–120). He emphasizes that encroachments from one system to another are doomed to failure. The autopoiesis of the systems allows them to communicate with the environment, with other systems. At the same time, the autopoiesis of the systems prevents the other systems from making the language or the medium of their own system the medium of another system. Attempting to specify your own medium for the other system leads to a break in communication. Anyone who buys the increased attention with money will soon be in debt. Whoever wants to replace the medium of power with the medium of law ends up in aristocracy. Democracy is not a system of law. Love does not always tolerate the truth. Art must not be measured by truthfulness. Revolutions are a construct of the ideal, not a reality.

Third, he endorses the notion that everything goes from the simple to the complex, from the concrete to the symbolic. Consequently, there is a first order in which the communication takes place called empire, facts, and reality. Then, there is second order, in which this empire, reality is reflected. Luhmann's system theory is a second-order idea. As long as everything communicates within these ideas of order, there are no encroachments from the first order to the second order, or vice versa—everything stays the same. Finally, for democracy as the system of common and good decision-making, Luhmann's systems theory makes the suggestion that good decisions are not made by asking the people. Wise decisions already logically cannot result from an indeterminate set of individual decisions. Therefore, instead of a democracy, a republic led by an elite with sufficient experience and decision-making powers would be advisable. In short, Luhmann prefers representation to participation in the name of social stability.

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