

Goodness in Memoriam

by [Stephen Schechter](#) (March 2019)



Self Portrait in the Garden at Ekely, Edvard Munch, 1942

Niklas Luhmann was a sociologist who died a month before his seventy-first birthday in 1998. His wife had pre-deceased him by twenty years. For the last twenty years of his life it seems he did nothing but write, book after book, article after article. They were books of general theory, analyses of modern society and specific areas of social life. He wrote about law and love, art and politics, any one of which was worth more

than what most people wrote about these topics in an academic lifetime. Reading his books was a humbling experience. They took time, because you had to think about every second sentence. You were amazed that his knowledge was so vast. How, I used to wonder, did he manage to read so many books and reference them? A friend of mine who had studied under him explained it this way. Once his wife died, he had no reason to do anything but work. And he had a filing system of index cards which he carried with him always. If he had an idea while driving on the autobahn he would simply pull over, take out a card and note down the idea, which he would catalogue under a bunch of headings always available for cross-reference. Now there was someone who took his work seriously and applied himself. And since his work taught him that observing was the highest contribution he could make to the world, he was never distracted by calls, inner or outer, to fix the world in any manner. He was free to work and disciplined himself under that freedom. An example to us all, even to those of us who came to his theory late in life.

A woman I met at a conference in the Pyrenees—I forget what the conference was about but not this charming and intelligent woman whom I got to know only the last day of the conference—told me that all of German sociology was divided between Luhmann and Habermas. Like my other friend, she had studied with Luhmann at Bielefeld and knew what she was talking about. Habermas was the leading incarnation of neo-Marxist theory and the darling of all those sociologists who thought capitalism had turned into an omnipresent system that colonized every aspect of our lives and not for the good. She herself was reluctant to abandon the philosophical smorgasbord of classical sociology and sought to reconcile Luhmann's systems theory with the Enlightenment Habermas and his acolytes claimed to want to save. But she was smart enough to know that Luhmann offered the best insight into how things

worked and not for nothing let slip the remark that students who studied with Habermas in some cases moved over to Luhmann once they came across his work, but the traffic never went the other way. I discovered the same phenomenon at my university. The problem was that the critical theory served up by Habermas and company so colonized the discipline that only a few independent-minded students ever made the crossover. Those that did turned out to be delightful.

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I had three such students. All three were quite different in temperament and in what they chose to study. But they were all bright and fun to be with. One evening I had them all over for dinner. The pretext was to celebrate one of their birthdays. After I brought out the cake and we devoured a good part of it, they complimented me on the choice. I explained to them that I had not really chosen it. Indeed, I did not even know if I could say I had bought it although I had paid for it, and proceeded to describe my encounter at the pastry shop. I had gone there, I had told them, with an idea of the cake I wanted—a *millefeuille*—but when I got there they did not have it. They had a fruit tart which I thought might do the trick, but they also had a tantalizing chocolate cake which seemed more fitting for a birthday celebration. I started to talk to the clerk behind the pastry counter about my dilemma. We went back and forth on the question, discussed the merits and demerits of what made for a good birthday cake. I lamented the fact that the *millefeuille* for which they were known was not available. Perhaps I should buy individual ones, I suggested. But then, she said, it would be hard to put candles on just one. She asked what I was serving. I told her. We then discussed what would go better, the fruit tart or the

chocolate cake. The latter was better for a birthday cake, but the fruit tart would go better with the meal. Less heavy. More refreshing. In a pinch you could even stick a candle in it, perhaps one of those sparklers that would avoid the need for many candles. Sold, I told her finally. So you see, I told my students, it was not so much that I bought the cake as the cake bought itself. Or the pastry clerk bought it for me, even if it was my credit card that was debited the amount. In fact, I told them, it felt as though the pastry clerk knew what I had really wanted before I did, because when I left the store with the tart I was convinced that was what I had wanted in the first place. As Luhmann would have said, it was the communication with all its rules that produced the decision, not my subjective intention, though of course, had I not wanted to buy a birthday cake I would never have entered the store in the first place.

Like love, one of the students remarked, at least as far as Luhmann sees it, which contrary to popular ideas about love consisting of romantic fusion, is rather a semantic discourse to keep intimacy going through misunderstanding. Or like texts which write themselves, someone else ventured, as the post-modernists like to say for all the wrong reasons. Right on, I said, I who had just finished writing a book, because when you are really into a text, certain words keep coming up at just the right moment without your having planned it. You think it's magic, but there it is. This book requires these words and not others, but you only realize it after the fact. It's not as if you started out with such and such a word in mind. But the words keep the text going and keep the text together. Is Saul also among the prophets? Are you Rosie Coldfield? Self-reference, someone else said, without which any system collapses, be it the economy or a book or even a pastry shop. We all laughed.

Self-reference. Now there's a concept I like. It is one of my favorites in Luhmann's theory that has so many good ones but no key one, since they all lead back to each other. Not that the theory is circular. It's just that you can enter it from any point. Take system, for example. To Luhmann, a system is not the way it is popularly used, as in the system that screws us over, a meaning not very different from the warmed-over Marxism of Habermas and friends. No, to Luhmann a system is merely the difference between a system and its environment. What defines a system is the elements inside it that keep it together. The system could be a society. It could be an individual. It could be a biological organism. As long as the elements which keep a system intact continue to function the system coheres. Of course any system is not hermetically sealed, which means it is open to its environment, receives stimulation from it. But how it chooses to react to stimulation from its environment depends on its internal elements, not on the environment. Usually a system will try to adapt in such a way as to keep itself intact. If it fails to do so it may collapse. Or explode. Our cells can turn cancerous and we die. An individual deals terribly with life and implodes. A society makes bad choices and disintegrates. Think of the rise and fall of the Roman Empire. People thought it got hammered from without, but historians insist the reasons for its collapse came from within. I agree. I think it's the same for people. I think Freud would think that too. We are all responsible for what happens to us. Why else bother to see an analyst?

I am digressing, a bit like Prufrock. (But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!) Let us return to the dinner party and the comment about self-reference of one of my students. He was right, of course. A text needs readers every bit as much as love needs lovers. Even the writer eventually becomes a reader. And only when the text is read does it

reveal itself, whatever the writer thinks he or she may have had in mind while writing. That's how misunderstanding produces agreement. Provisionally. Long enough to keep the conversation going. Just like mine with the pastry clerk. If you are lucky you come away with a cake that makes you happy. Some people would say if you choose properly. Intelligently. With an open heart and mind.

The same works for society. It needs people the way a text needs readers. Once the people get to work you see what the society is all about. But the society is not made up of people. It is made up of the communications that circulate within it and the way they are organized. A friend of mine once wrote that every society demands its sacrifice. I suppose that is true even of ours, but the way ours is organized gives people a lot more leeway than they used to have. They are no longer commandeered for service in the king's armies or seigneurial justice. Instead they have to deal with the frustrations of bureaucracy and mindlessness in exchange for vastly increased freedom in every aspect of their lives. A small price to pay in the light of history. In the light of recent history even. Think of all those tens of thousands of people goose-steeping in front of Hitler and the tens of thousands marshalled in an adoring audience behind them. There's real sacrifice for you, still on display today in North Korea and hidden in China behind the crooked crush of money floating in the swimming pools of party hacks and their cronies. How silly then to keep on insisting that open democratic societies are every bit as tyrannical as the ancien régime, a modern wolf dressed up in grandmother's negligee. But Habermas and friends cannot let go of their attachment to their obsolete picture of modern society no matter how much history has disappointed them. Instead, they thrive on it, disappointment the fuel to their narcissism. Luhmann had no such problems. He was German, young when the Nazis came to

power, but not that young he did not know what a closed society looked like. Which must have helped him see very clearly how modern society works and the dangers its own evolution poses to its reproduction, dangers like overload in the court system, the demonization of political opponents, perhaps even the burden of choice under conditions of liberty. The latter is my formulation, not his. That said, one can readily understand why people who moved from Habermas to Luhmann never went back.

Individuals makes choices which, if you are a sociologist, can include the kind of theory you choose to work with. My friend who wrote that every society demands its sacrifices chose to work with Marx. Not that she did not appreciate the attractions of systems theory, even if her knowledge of it stopped at that of Luhmann's mentor, Talcott Parsons. I know because she once told me, when I asked her why she was not very enthusiastic about the elaborate neo-Marxist, post-modern critical theory of a colleague of mine, that systems theory was freer. My colleague's theory was too constrictive, covered everything, demanded total conformity was what I heard in her answer, and my friend was anything but a conformist. She preferred Marx, probably because he was sufficiently remote in time that she could work on his texts as she liked, play with them as Arendt once said Brecht and his generation did, as I now play with the Bible. My friend's sociological work focused on women, but you sensed Marx's theoretical constructs were her inspiration. Early in her career she had written a book denouncing Parsons' theory as ideology, as if she intuited even then where the real challenge and attraction lay. But though she never crossed over to Luhmann, neither did she have much truck with any of Marx's disciples who wanted to stretch

his categories. She was, in short, a classicist. She loved that class on Marx she taught when she came to explain his critique of Feuerbach's rapture over a cherry tree as an example of historical materialism. If you did not think about the commercial history of the cherry tree when you looked at it, she would explain to her students, Marx felt you simply missed the point. Given how her students looked at her, she would tell me, they mostly missed the point, especially those necking in the top row. And then she would laugh.

She was beautiful when she laughed. It was as though she were water skiing, her hair blowing in the wind and her lungs exulting at the rush of freedom. But it didn't happen too often. Most of the time the anarchist in her was kept corseted up, allowed out when everyday life burst forth in all its absurdity but held tightly by the hand as her mother must have held hers, and suitably chastened by what after all was considered proper decorum for an intellectual of her calibre at that time and place, and a woman to boot. She and her colleagues, who were also my colleagues, had kicked over the traces when young and then settled comfortably into an orthodoxy of their own. She was far too bright not to notice and let them know she was not fooled by their chatter. But she could never quite break with it either. Who can make a clean break with their turbulent years? Boomers even recite them at dinner parties the older they get. Ah, les beaux jours! Myself, I want nothing to do with them. It's like that woman I met in the Pyrenees said. Once you cross over you never go back.

In the end my friend got caught by the epoch she never wanted to leave. Early onset dementia got hold of her and would not let go, like the branches of the tree that snared Absalom and would not let go either. Genetic bad luck, one would think,

but I wonder if all that pressure she held inside herself all those years had not something to do with it. She had gone away to study and had she stayed away, her spirit might have wound up laughing and dancing by the ocean in California. Instead she came back to a land that became her prison, to which she offered up her spirit which burned so purely and brightly until it became the sacrifice every society, as she wrote, demanded. And thus of her goodness we were graced only slightly; at dinner parties, or the end of love affairs.

I meet people who are the flip side of my now-deceased friend every day. They don't give a hoot for theory, but they do subscribe to the prejudices that flow from the theoretical framework of my late and not enough lamented friend. Such indolence allows them to enjoy all the pleasures of the society whose orientation they denounce. Psychologically, for one reason or another, it is very profitable for them. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for society, the one that offers them untold freedom for which so many people a lifetime ago willingly sacrificed their lives. Few want to defend freedom any more. They consider it a mirage like Feuerbach's cherry tree, hiding from view the oppressive hand of a racist culture whose targets are blacks, gays, and Muslims. That black rap music lyrics have become dominant white speech, that gays marry wherever they want, that Muslims are responsible for most of the world's wars and the millions of refugees these wars have created makes no difference. Even women they still consider second class citizens in need of protection, even if the really endangered species are men whose sperm count is plummeting downward at an alarming rate. Of course, you are not allowed to say this in polite company, unless you are a crime writer of mystery novels.

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My friend would not have said that in polite company, though she may have admitted it in the confines of her home. Perhaps that's why she liked mystery novels. Luhmann could have written mystery novels for that very reason, but he did not. Instead he wrote books on sociological theory which are even better. Most crime novels, the good ones that is, only see half the story. They tell the truth that people see in their daily lives, which society's story-tellers on the nightly or morning news do not want and cannot bring themselves to say. Not, after all, in polite company, and they are polite company, which is another way of describing society which does not see itself outside itself. Nor do the protagonists of crime novels, caught in the daily action tasks of that same society, dealing with the evil that gets washed up on their doorsteps. With Luhmann's theory you step outside both of them, the individuals as heroes and the society blind to its own functioning. But you need the theory to see it, pages and pages of abstract concepts to understand why, as he put it in one of his essays, men and women often wind up getting divorced on car trips. What you get when you get it is called second-order observation. It could prove very useful if it got to be a practice as daily as prayer once was, and not simply a way to tell a story at a dinner party about how the cake you bought at the pastry shop bought itself.

And where would that take us? you may ask. To the very same place some time spent with a good analyst takes us, I would say. Getting a handle on the way our world works is no less important than getting one on the way we do. Think of it as an antidote to implosion. And a ticket to freedom. You get to say what you think about things even when it makes your friends,

and therefore you, uneasy at dinner parties. Of course, you will not be invited back, and even if you are you might not want to go back. You may even find yourself humming that Led Zeppelin song about being lonely, lonely, lonely, lonely, lonely, but so what? You will be happily lonely, full of ideas as you drive along the highway, and if you are disciplined you will find a way to pull over and jot down what came to you for future reference when one day you may want to write a book. But even if you do not you will be contributing to the social good, withholding assent to the jackals braying about how bad the least bad society in history is.

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Stephen Schecter is a poet, writer and sociologist who specializes in telling stories from the Hebrew Bible. His work can be seen at www.shabbtai.com.

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