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TAUTOLOGY AND PARADOX IN THE SELF-DESCRIPTIONS OF MODERN SOCIETY

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Translation and Introduction

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TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

Two Paradigm Changes in Sociological Systems Theory

Over the past two decades, Niklas Luhmann has elaborated a general functionalist theory of social systems that continues the program of the "grand tradition" in social theory to develop theories of universal range and applicability. But while current discussions in social theory focus on reinterpreting, reconstructing, and synthesizing the "classics," Luhmann's work is based on recent developments in general systems theory, cybernetics, biological epistemology, and information theory—to name just a few. At present, Luhmann's theory of social systems is the only general social theory that can claim to introduce a new paradigm to the field.¹ Utilization of research traditions external to particular scientific disciplines always impedes the recognition and—eventually—the adaptation of innovative paradigms. But if accepted, Luhmann's proposal will radically change the conventional ways of doing social theory.

Luhmann (1984) interprets his theory of social systems as a special case of general systems theory. Together with machines, organisms, and psychic or personal systems, social systems constitute the generic class of "systems in general." The category of "social systems" itself comprises interaction systems, organizations, and entire societies. Three fundamental theoretical decisions structure this hierarchical schema. First, Luhmann avoids the frequently criticized "organismic analogy" in which most previous systems-theoretical models of society were trapped (Turner, 1986). Although organisms and social systems belong to the same generic

category of "systems in general," simple analogies are misplaced since all social systems—unlike machines and organisms—use communication to process meaning. Second, in Luhmann's hierarchical arrangement of systems, organizations, societies and interaction systems are located at the same level of generality: they are all examples of social systems without forming a conceptual (let alone ontological) hierarchy themselves. That is, Luhmann rejects the interactionist position in the micro-macro debate (Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel, 1981) that explains organizational or societal macrostructures in terms of interactional microdynamics such as "negotiation," "situational representation," or the "social construction of reality" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Organizations, societies, and interaction systems are all emergent, i.e., irreducible forms of social systems (Luhmann, 1982).

Consequently (third), Luhmann (1984) dismisses the traditional microsociological model of society consisting of (interacting) individuals. Although "overlapping" and "interpenetrating," psychic or personal systems, like organisms, belong to the environments of social system. To say that social systems consist of (relations between) individuals is no more appropriate than saying that individuals consist of (associations among) cells. To be sure, social systems utilize individual resources such as consciousness to process communication and to build social structures, just as individuals cannot have consciousness without ongoing neuronal and physiological processes. But social systems draw their boundaries so as to exclude the parts of individuality they attribute to their environment,² just as concrete individuals or

¹ For a different view, see Haferkamp (1987).

² Familiar sociological concepts such as "role" or

personal systems do not identify themselves in terms of organismic processes of which they may not even be aware.³

These fundamental conceptual decisions prepare two paradigm changes which Luhmann (1984) introduces into sociological systems theory. Both reorientations revolve around the classical sociological problem of how social order is possible under conditions of egoistic individual interests (Hobbes, Smith), structural and functional differentiation (Durkheim, Simmel, Weber), "double contingency" (Parsons), or "communicative rationality" (Habermas). The mainstream sociological tradition has seen the solution to this problem in shared symbolic systems, generalized cultural values, and normative and communicative consensus. Social integration is assumed to be largely unproblematic and rather stable since generalized cultural symbolisms or idealized structures of speech already embody consensus that simply has to be implemented in social norms, legal rules, or constitutional commitments. The sociological tradition delegates the solution to the problem of social order to the cultural system, but the crucial question of how general values and integrating normative commitments are possible themselves is left unanswered.

Luhmann (1984) dismisses the notion of a culturally preestablished and taken-for-granted social order. "Double contingency" means that Alter and Ego (personal or social systems) may select communications from an

infinite horizon of alternative possibilities.⁴ Alter and Ego are free to reject each other's communicative suggestions, to select alternative expectations and behaviors, to not respond at all, or to (intentionally or unintentionally) misinterpret each other's symbolic gestures.⁵ Interpretive sociology and symbolic interactionism assume that personal systems share meaningful, significant symbols that allow for reciprocal perspectives, complementary expectations, and mutual empathy. Similarly to generalized cultural values, shared symbols account for structured intersubjectivity. However, understanding communicative suggestions does not imply accepting Alter's selections as restricting the spectrum of Ego's selections. Alter may even systematically decide to misunderstand whatever Ego has to suggest. Even good reasons and valid arguments (Habermas, 1984) coordinate contingent selections only if both Alter and Ego accept "rationality" as a stable mode of communication. But what if Alter and/or Ego get tired of being rational?

Moreover, Luhmann (1984) plausibly argues that due to latent self-referential operations, personal systems are never fully transparent for each other. Through communication, Alter reveals only part of her individuality, her "true intentions," her "real opinion" about Ego, but Ego can never safely "infer" or "deduce" how Alter's utterances fit into the larger contexts of her biography, her outlook on life, her feelings. In some cases, Ego's knowing what Alter knows and thinks about her would not make possible but—quite the contrary—would terminate further communication. Even if dialogical transparency was possible, it would probably not increase the chances of communication being continued. Social order does not rest on excluding misunderstanding, conflict, deviance, or disappointment but on communication systems deciding how to handle deviance, conflict, and misunderstanding. Even

"organizational membership" express this distinction between social and personal systems.

³ Observers of social or personal systems, however, are free to draw systemic boundaries in a different way. Following a "constructivist" epistemology, Luhmann (1984, pp. 647ff) rejects the empiricist notion of "true knowledge corresponding to objective reality." As a social system, scientific observations follow patterns of selectivity that need not be identical with the patterns employed by the objects of investigation, e.g., personal or social systems. An observer *can* describe personal systems in terms of neuronal processes, although personal systems themselves select different descriptions. As contingent selections, both forms of description compete with equally possible alternatives. That is, no description can exclusively claim to represent "objective reality." However, Luhmann (1984) does assume that the realism of second-order sociological descriptions consists in these descriptions reproducing first-order systemic self-descriptions. Interestingly, this postulate is very similar to the decision of radical interpretive sociology to *validate* sociological accounts by confronting them with members' accounts; for a more detailed discussion of the universality of the hermeneutic problem, see Fuchs and Wiggins (1986).

⁴ Therefore, I would suggest the label "contingency functionalism" for Luhmann's version of systems theory (as opposed to Parsonian "structural functionalism") to emphasize the improbability of order in Luhmann's approach.

⁵ Luhmann (1976) regards "symbolically generalized communication media" such as truth, love, or power as fairly successful solutions to the problem of double contingency. However, these media represent comparatively late evolutionary achievements and presuppose developed system differentiation (cf. Fuchs, 1986).

(and especially!) highly personalized, intimate relations with considerable mutual transparency are never immune to surprises and disappointments. Their stability does not require complete predictability (which would deprive them of their “charm”) but rather the systemic ability to deal with inevitable surprises and disappointments once they have occurred.

Mutual understanding on the basis of shared symbolic systems and reciprocal transparency cannot explain how social order, i.e., the adjustment of contingent selections over time, is possible. Neither can power or sanctions. Sanctions do not suppress deviant selectivity but encourage Alter to adhere to her expectations once Ego’s deviant selections disappoint Alter and suddenly reveal the contingency of all expectations. In fact, normative expectations are the “cause” for deviance and the disturbance of order, and sanctions do not suppress deviance but—quite the contrary—reinforce the expectations without which particular selections could not be experienced as “deviant” to begin with.

In sum, Luhmann (1984) rejects all traditional solutions to the problem of social order: generalized cultural values, political power, communicative rationality, and hermeneutic empathy. The critique of the sociological tradition sets the stage for the second paradigm change in sociological systems theory: The concept of “autopoiesis” or the “self-referential” constitution of social systems.⁶

Humberto Maturana (1982) has introduced the concept of “autopoiesis” into general systems theory. Autopoiesis or “self-reference” means that systems reproduce their own elements, the interrelations (structures) between them, and that systems draw their own boundaries by determining what belongs to systemic environments and what counts as an internal element or event. In other words, self-reference produces order out of noise. For example, autopoietic organic cells reproduce themselves and—through immune systems—determine and defend systemic boundaries. Similarly, individuals define self-identities through autopoietic operations: only an individual can decide what to accept

as constituting its individuality and how to demarcate its identity from other individuals who all determine their self-identities autopoietically.⁷ As a social system, the family reproduces its elements (i.e., communication patterns with particular meanings) and demarcates its identity from all other social systems (i.e., from other families or the economy). Self-reference implies that systemic identities are independent from observation by other systems and cannot be “caused” by forces outside the system without participating in causation. Only cells (but not communications) can create new cells. Cells need external resources, but they decompose and recombine external resources according to autopoietic operations. Other individuals may suggest possible self-identifications, but only if an individual accepts these suggestions and feeds them into its autopoietic operations will external influences become relevant. Self-referential systems produce their own causes and determine what counts as internal and external causation. As a self-referential social system, science is “autonomous” to the extent to which it is able to produce its own “causes” for the development of knowledge. There are external causes of changes in self-referential (scientific) systems, but external causes are effective only if they are “translated” or transformed into internal systemic operations. Economic crises affect scientific budgets, but autopoietic operations determine which sectors of science will be affected in what ways, to what degrees, and with what consequences.

How does autopoiesis solve the problem of double contingency? As stated before, Luhmann (1984) argues that social order is not based on mutual understanding and predictability, on shared symbolic systems, on generalized cultural values, or on suppressing deviance. Under conditions of double contingency, both Alter and Ego may select expectation and behaviors from an infinite horizon of equally possible alternatives (“world complexity”). Social order, however, is possible only if Alter and Ego mutually adjust their selection patterns, if they accept each other’s selections as restricting further selectivity. If Ego communicates a suggestion, Alter is free to misinterpret, to ignore, to ridicule Ego’s offer or to communicate an

⁶ Within systems theory, the concept of “autopoiesis” replaces older concepts such as system-parts relationships or system-environment exchanges. These older themes are not dismissed, but “autopoiesis” emphasizes systemic “closure” instead of intersystemic exchange.

⁷ “Autopoiesis” reminds one of “autonomy” but does not carry on the normative implications of the older term.

alternative suggestion. But if Alter (for whatever reason)⁸ decides to accept Ego's selection as conditioning her own selectivity, self-referential processes of system-building begin to operate. Since they are "black boxes" for each other, Alter and Ego strenuously look for clues indicating mutual expectations; they observe that they are being observed and select gestures and behaviors in the light of expected expectations. At the beginning, emerging communication structures are extremely fragile.⁹ Whoever makes the first move is disadvantaged since this requires exposing oneself to observation and criticism. Making the first suggestion means taking the risk of being observed as someone who does not understand the situation, whose remarks are embarrassingly out of place, whose expectations are hopelessly unrealistic.¹⁰ For these reasons alone, communication systems are very unlikely to emerge. Once communication gets going, it is always possible that Alter's responses to Ego's suggestions reveal a misunderstanding. The problem for Ego and Alter is not to exclude being misunderstood or to suppress unexpected expectations but to expect possible misunderstanding and deviance and to adjust one's communication accordingly. If Ego realizes that Alter misunderstands Ego's

expectations, she can interrupt communication and declare she was only joking or she can readjust her own expectations to Alter's misinterpretation and try to be someone else. Alter and Ego can decide to feign mutual understanding, to postpone the resolution of misunderstandings, to "play around" for a while and then expose Alter/Ego as a fool who took the interaction seriously. Self-reference implies that no one (not even an observer) knows what is going to happen; one cannot plan or predict the future, one can only decide to learn (to adjust one's expectations to surprises and disappointments) or not to learn (to adhere to one's expectations against a deviant reality). If one's declaration of love faces nothing but laughter, one can decide to laugh too or to love platonically; and to save one's dignity, observers are told that one did not believe in success anyway.

Self-referential systems select their own histories and futures; they build up their own chains of causation. A (sociological) observer cannot predict or explain the futures and histories of self-referential communication systems since autopoiesis and contingency mean that such systems themselves decide whether and how they are to be continued or terminated, how they draw systemic boundaries, what types of self-descriptions they select.¹¹ An observer can only observe what autopoietic systems cannot observe themselves: that one cannot observe (predict, explain) what is unobservable (unpredictable, unexplainable). Luhmann calls this task of sociological enlightenment "second-order cybernetics."

Luhmann's present paper analyzes self-observations and self-descriptions as necessary operations of self-referential social systems (in this case, of societies). Autopoiesis requires self-descriptions that determine systemic identities by demarcating systems from their environments. Therefore, self-descriptions always use fundamental distinction schemas: distinctions are required to process information.¹² Determining what a system is requires determining what a system is not. For example, lovers identify their love by demarcating it from the rest of the world, but

⁸ It follows from Luhmann's position that it is impossible to indicate the general conditions under which stable social systems are more likely than unlikely to emerge. This scientific skepticism is partly due to the notion of "autopoiesis" itself (see below) but also follows from the unpredictable complexity of possible situations conducive to system-building. Interaction systems, for example, might emerge on the basis of simple accidents: Alter accidentally responds to Ego and thereby commits herself to the next response. In fact, Luhmann's notions of "causation" and "explanation" differ considerably from conventional approaches. "Causes" are attributions self-referential systems use to distinguish between "internal" and "external" events; "explanation" means revealing the contingency of systemic problem solutions in the light of functionally equivalent solutions.

⁹ Ethnomethodological accounts of lifeworlds employing folk methods to sustain ritually the illusion of shared facticity are very similar to Luhmann's account of the improbable mutual adjustments required for system-building. Social order is not "given," but Alter and Ego try to gain a sense of shared understandings that makes the unexpected expectable.

¹⁰ For this very reason, revolutions are very unlikely to take place. Those who suggest radical changes of social structures are always in a worse position than those defending the status quo. Revolutionaries have nothing to offer except that people will be happier, wealthier, and emancipated *after* the revolution.

¹¹ As soon as social systems build up an internal history, however, routines and repetitions reduce contingency and stabilize expectation structures. Surprises and disappointments still occur, but the system no longer experiences *nothing but* surprises and disappointments.

¹² For example, one visually perceives an object only by distinguishing it from surrounding "noise."

they do so knowing that all lovers do the same. Self-descriptions thus always face problems of paradox and tautology: *all* autopoeitic communication systems identify themselves by contrasting their identities against *all* other communication systems.

Sociology of knowledge has shown that the semantic structures of societal self-description covary with social structures. The comparatively simple structures of primitive societies allow for unchallenged semantic representation whereas high cultures produce self-descriptions expressing the perspectives of urban upper classes. In functionally differentiated modern societies, each subsystem designs its own description of society with no systemic description claiming unchallenged validity. Functional differentiation requires generalization of cultural symbolisms and of societal self-descriptions. To understand society as manifesting abstract reason (Age of Enlightenment) or as one of the emanations of the Ego (German idealism), however, leads to counterintuitive and unproductive self-descriptions.

Stating the problem of societal identity even more abstractly, Luhmann observes two general forms of describing society: tautological and paradoxical self-descriptions. Both versions develop "pure" self-reference: society is what it is (which has conservative implications), or society is what it is not (which has progressive or even revolutionary implications). Pure self-reference, however, does not lead to meaningful and concrete societal self-descriptions. Tautologies must be "de-tautologized," paradoxes must be "de-paradoxized."

Under these conditions, societal self-descriptions turn into ideologies. Ideologies interrupt pure self-reference by assuming "inviolable levels" of values that conceal the contingency of basic assertions and recommend particular strategies for action. The conservatives believe in tradition, the progressives in progress. Ideologies, however, age fast since their actuality depends on historical time. Social change outdates ideological antagonisms; the old controversies lose their relevance and credibility.

Post-ideological societal self-descriptions focus on new "inviolable levels" of values that provide semantic certainty under conditions of increased contingency. The new social movements focus societal self-descriptions on

the experience of anxiety: society describes itself as facing nuclear and ecological disaster. Experiencing anxiety is noncontingent since anxiety cannot be refuted. Anxiety suggests societal self-descriptions that conceal the basic tautological and paradoxical problems of self-reference. New social movements use anxiety to suggest the differentiation of society, but changing the pattern of social differentiation would lead to disaster itself. In this situation, societal self-descriptions are required that determine systemic identity without dissolving the pattern of functional differentiation. As an "artificial" interruption of self-reference "second-order cybernetics," the description of societal self-descriptions, might provide a more appropriate approach. Second-order cybernetics is Luhmann's program for social theory and sociological enlightenment: revealing as contingent what social systems themselves perceive as natural.

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NIKLAS LUHMANN

Tautology and Paradox in the Self-Descriptions of Modern Society

I

Self-referential systems are able to observe themselves. By using a fundamental distinction schema to delineate their self identities, they can direct their own operations toward their self identities. This may occur for different reasons and involve very different distinctions. As soon as the need arises to direct self-observations through structural predispositions instead of entirely leaving them to particular situations, we may speak of "self-descriptions." Descriptions fix a structure or a "text" for possible observations which can now be made more systematically, remembered and handed down more easily, and which can now be connected better to each other. Independent and occasional self-observations are not excluded thereby but become less important. Occasional observations now form a "variety pool" for the selection of self-descriptions that can be tested during the evolution of ideas and may be stabilized as tradition. As a result, societies might adhere to traditions of self-descriptions that have lost their adequacy with respect to the structural complexity of the system but that cannot be abandoned since self-descriptions perform important systemic functions.

Thus, in relationship to systemic environments, social-structural and semantic components of a system are not necessarily synchronous. But by and large it seems safe to assume that obsolescence of self-descriptions and misdirection of self-observations will finally become apparent, that a considerable degree of discrepancy cannot be tolerated for a long time, and that a loss of realism in self-descriptions gives reasons for revisions even if the original level of plausibility of the cultural tradition cannot be regained very rapidly. In any case, if one intends to observe and describe how societal self-descriptions and self-observations are transformed in response to structural transformations of society, a broad perspective and a

correspondingly abstract theory appear appropriate given such transition periods.

In simple segmentary societies, self-descriptions were rather unproblematic. The level of semantic complexity could be kept fairly low since these societies were organized around very small units such as households, tribes, and settlements and since more complex associations had to function only occasionally. Elementary knowledge of the surrounding geographical space, of individual persons, and—sometimes—of mythologies demarcating the given order of human life from frightening alternative orders were sufficient. Myths and cult forms could be brought into harmony with environmental conditions, structures, and interests without this process becoming visible as a contingent decision. For example, as John Middleton and David Trait (1958, p. 25) state:

Whereas the ancestral cult in particular is a ritualization of organization based on descent, the earth cult is a ritualization of organization based primarily on locality or community with a high degree of political interdependence of descent groups.

Semantic complexity does not increase until society is based more on asymmetries and inequalities. The improbability of the social order becomes apparent and requires explication, if not justification, as soon as center and periphery, particularly urban and rural areas, are separated. This is especially true in the case of hierarchical stratification. Viewed in retrospect, it may seem as if these inequalities exerted some pressures for legitimation of privileged status positions, but this was hardly the case. If social structure differentiates along these lines, legitimation is unnecessary since an alternative order cannot be realistically imagined anyway. Consequently, one can hardly assume "consensus" or the "need for consensus"; as if social order was based on a conscious selection from other possibilities. Articulating the meaning and the

“good forms” of social life was purely a matter of the upper classes, i.e., an urban phenomenon. Societal self-descriptions were phrased in terms of polis-civitas-civilitas-societas civilis, in religious terms of the corpus Christi or of the “community of sinners” with different prospects for salvation, or in terms of corporate doctrine (“Standlehre”) with its codified morality. But all of these self-descriptions utilized the asymmetric structure of society itself, regardless of whether they emerged from the center¹ or were imposed as self-conceptions of the upper classes.

The most conspicuous characteristic of this pattern of relating social structure to the self-description of society is the opportunity of an unchallenged representation of society in society. There is only one position from which to develop and circulate self-descriptions: the position of the center or of the hierarchical leaders, i.e., the position of the city or of the aristocracy. The asymmetrical form of social differentiation credibly and effectively excludes other possibilities. Under these circumstances, the differences between a primarily religious and a primarily political concept of society cannot be balanced. They are adopted into the cultural semantics and are often structured hierarchically themselves: while gaining priority in the cultural semantics, religion must actually connect to the political center in order to be generally accepted. Viewed retrospectively, this division of labor was important to contemporary experience, but it does not distinguish high cultures of this type from today’s society. Rather, the crucial historical difference between past and present society is that the possibility of an unchallenged representation of society in society had to be abandoned upon transition to a primarily functional mode of social differentiation. None of the functional systems can now claim a privileged position; each develops its own description of society according to the presumed priority of its own function. But since the concrete operations of particular systems are too diverse, no system can impose its descriptions upon others. Even if a new type of difference develops, i.e., the difference between functionally differentiated systems and the protest

against functional differentiation or, to speak with Habermas (1984), the difference between systems and the lifeworld, it is impossible to decide from which of the two perspectives society could be described comprehensively or, at least, representatively.

In historical comparison, a characteristic feature of modern society is thus the loss of natural representation or, to use an older term, the impossibility of a *representatio identitatis*. The totality of society is never fully present and cannot be realized as a totality. As a consequence, the concept of representation is reconstructed as a specifically political concept, implying that from now on representation can only be organized according to the functionally limited view of the political system. The question arises as to how a self-description of society is possible at all once natural representation must be abandoned.

II

The underlying hypothesis of the following argument is that society responds to the loss of its natural and unchallenged representation by stating the problem of identity in a more abstract way. It is well known that in the eighteenth century the apotheosis of Reason was suggested as a solution. But this attempt to describe modern society comprehensively has failed. Identifying society in terms of absolute Reason has remained entirely ineffective and generates counterintuitive effects upon implementation into social reality. Restating the problem of representation in a more abstract way, however, corresponds to the nature of the task and—in classical sociological terms—to the necessity to respond to increased differentiation by generalizing the cultural symbolisms expressing societal unity (Parsons, 1960). But formalization and “proceduralization” of the principles of Reason are only expedients that do not promise concrete results once specifications are required. Eventually, only the options of counterfactually adhering to reason, of mere stubbornness, of lament, or of resignation remain. Of course, it is hard to renounce Reason. But perhaps we just remain loyal to a historical name brand of cultural semantics while reality has changed in the meantime. In any case, it should be worth looking for alternatives, for functional equivalents of a Reason-oriented reflection of societal unity.

The apotheosis of the “Ego” in German

¹ Therefore, Edward Shils (1961) correctly states that the main problem resulting from the separation between center and periphery is the diffusion of culture.

idealism, particularly following Fichte's doctrine of science, has also failed to provide an adequate societal self-description. The "Ego," however, was already very accurately conceived of as the resolution of a paradox by means of an approximative idea: the Ego posits the difference between Ego and non-Ego and raises itself to an ideal Ego "above and within the limit" (Fichte, 1962, p. 509). But even more so as for the orientation toward Reason, the social dimension was lost in the process. The problem of paradox was related to knowledge, not to society. Consequently, the elaboration of theory was preoccupied with religious or aesthetic and, eventually, with pedagogic issues but not with issues of economics and politics.

First, we want to surpass the formalism of Reason and the idealism of the Ego by means of a radical reflection. There can be two different forms of reflecting upon the identity of a system: tautological and paradoxical forms. Correspondingly, we might say society is what it is or, alternatively, society is what it is not. Both forms of reflection, however, do not improve but block the operations of the system. As with Reason formerly, both forms of reflection lack concrete conceptual and normative implications for possible societal self-descriptions. Since both versions have the disadvantage of sterility, an observer can neither guess which one will be chosen nor recommend which one to choose; nor can he predict what consequences one or the other version of self-description will have for the system.² Therefore, even observations of observations or descriptions of descriptions of a system contribute to systemic self-blocking and become tautological or paradoxical themselves since they conceptualize their subject-matter in a way that excludes concrete elaboration of societal self-descriptions.

We may overcome this obstacle by examining how the system itself manages to overcome it. In a very general sense, systems avoid tautological or paradoxical obstacles to meaningful self-descriptions by "developing" self-reference (Lofgren, 1978, 1979). That is, the (positive or negative) circularity of self-reference is interrupted and interpreted in a way that cannot—in the last analysis—be accounted for. The most famous example is

the type-theoretical solution to the paradox in set theory. In any case, processes of "de-tautologization" and "de-paradoxization" require the "invisibility" (Barel, 1983) of the underlying systemic functions and problems. That is, non-tautological and non-paradoxical societal self-descriptions are not due to individual plans or intentions but are possible only if crucial systemic processes and operations remain latent. Only an observer is able to realize what systems themselves are unable to realize. Or, alternatively, we can say that the problem is to avoid "strange loops," "tangled hierarchies," (Hofstadter, 1979) or their effects such as "double bind" without being able to eliminate tautologies and paradoxes as identity problems of self-referential systems.

Therefore, modern society does not admit that its self-description faces a problem of tautology or paradox. Only by coding its identity is society able to construct social theories. But depending on whether tautological or paradoxical approaches to self-descriptions are selected, very different semantic systems emerge. Tautological approaches lead to rather conservative self-descriptions, approaches based on paradox lead to rather progressive—if not revolutionary—self-descriptions. The basic problem of self-reference generates the antagonism between the two approaches. If society is supposed to be what it is, then the problem can only be to conserve society, to continue solving its problems, and possibly to improve problem solving and to overcome unexpected difficulties. If, on the other hand, society is assumed to be what it is not, then theories of a different kind must be suggested. For example, as popular versions of Marxism or the Cargo cult show, it is possible to define societal identity as a future possibility the realization of which is prevented by certain forces. Alternatively, the problem is restated in a temporally asymmetric way. One then assumes that a structural-logical development will realize—through revolution or evolution—what present society is "not yet."

Elaborated as comprehensive theory, each version faces specific difficulties that need not further concern us here. We are not so much interested in the differences between these two versions or in the amount of intellectual sophistication invested in their conceptual elaboration but in the characteristics they share despite, or even because of,

² See Stockton (1969) for a discussion of such a dilemma arising for an observer.

the bifurcation between them. What tautological and paradoxical approaches to societal self-descriptions have in common is that they transform descriptions of society into ideologies.

After originating around 1800, the concept of ideology has undergone multiple transformations (Dierse, 1976, 1982). First, ideology was thought of as semantic control of social reproduction through ideas. After having been used in a purely pejorative and polemic way, the concept of ideology was finally granted social scientific acceptability. This was largely the merit of Marx and Engels, not so much because they created a perfectly adequate concept of ideology, but because of their theory of capitalist society in which the concept is functionally located. Ever since then, the concept of ideology has displayed a particular reflexivity that appears immune to empirical evidence and criticism. Once their latent function is being revealed, ideologies draw upon some kind of "support" that prevents them from decomposing. That is, an ideology is simply propagated as being "biased" ("parteilich") or as practical knowledge, i.e., as theory that has become "praxis." In directing and justifying social action, ideologies become replaceable once different lines of action seem more appropriate, but they can never be destroyed by criticism.

Practical relevance is part of the very nature and self-explanation of ideology. Observing ideological self-descriptions, however, reveals more complicated frames of reference. Ideologies are firmly based on the implicitness of their basic problem definitions, on concealing their intentions, on the latency of their fundamental assumptions. Descriptions of societal self-descriptions face the antagonism of ideologies instead of reflecting upon the more fundamental problems of tautology and paradox. Each ideology may claim to represent a comprehensive holistic system if it is able to explain why competing ideologies exist. With Marx offering the most ambitious model, successful ideologies make it seem unnecessary to recur to the basic (tautological or paradoxical) forms in which societal self-descriptions conceptualize the problem of identity. An ideology stabilizes itself by including its counter-ideology into its system, and it is hardly more than a variant of this strategy if the conservatives acquiesce in counter-

enlightenment while indicating their own standpoint through nothing but *aperçus* to avoid exposure to criticism.

The crucial themes of early ideologies depended on historical accidents such as the French Revolution or on contemporary social problems, particularly on the consequences of rapid industrialization. This new form of reflecting upon societal identity acquired topics and themes from wherever they were available, and this led to historical relativity and to gradual obsolescence of many opinions regardless of whether socialist or liberalist ideologies were involved. It was nevertheless premature to diagnose the "end of ideologies." Rather, intellectual skepticism and the readiness for trivial moralizations or, if one considers France, the retreat into literary arcanistics have become even more prominent. But fundamentally different forms of societal self-descriptions have not been established. The senility of formerly predominant ideologies is troublesome for its respective adherents but does not necessarily lead to new suggestions. In the long run, it may be possible that second-order systems-theoretical observations (that is, observations and descriptions of societal self-observations and self-descriptions) will yield very different results. At present, however, there is no elaborated semantic system of this kind that was already implemented as actual societal knowledge. For now, we can only attempt to clarify the implications of this view and to reformulate the concept of ideology from this perspective.

III

In the nineteenth century, various fundamental distinction schemas had been developed as structural frameworks for particular ideological contents. The self-identification of society requires descriptions based upon fundamental distinctions that define what society is by determining what it is not. Following the distinction between power and property that had already been prominent in the eighteenth century, one suggestion pointed to the distinction between state and society. After rejecting Hegel's attempt to overcome this distinction and to ingeniously suppress the necessarily reemerging problem of paradox, the distinction between state and society was accepted as indisputable fact around the mid-nineteenth century (von Stein, 1850; Bockenforde, 1976). Depending on ideologi-

cal predispositions, this distinction made it possible to ascribe more or fewer responsibilities to the state. As opposed to medieval thought, however, the distinction between state and society also made it possible to replace religion with the economy and to describe the future prospects of the epoch in terms of the economy (which was referred to as "society" for this very reason). In this way the concept of society was established, but the (tautological or paradoxical) position pointing at the identity of the difference between state and society was left unoccupied. The old European *societas civilis*—which was still remembered in Hegel's concept of the state—did not find any successors (Luhmann, 1985a). The fascinating capacities of distinction schemas to direct information processing block insight into the fundamental unity of what is being distinguished: distinguishing what is different makes sense only when positing an underlying identity that permits realizing what is different.

Although the distinction between state and society defined the concept of society and made its usage almost impossible for emerging sociology, the "true" theory of society was built upon a distinction which transcended society as a social system. This distinction related the social—in various terms—to the individual and thus conceived of the individual as an extra-social entity.

This line of theorizing is already present in the newer philosophy of mind and its notion of the subject. It is also present in a notion of the individual that abstracts from all its social positions and involvements while presupposing that the individual identifies itself only by reflecting upon its individuality.³ Such an individual can be expected to live in plural contexts (Sciolla, 1983). To compensate for this abstract status, such an individual is capable of complaining—about alienation or about unrealized promises of freedom, about inequality or about the inability of society to live up to the standards which the individual believes all individuals accept as reasonable.

³ Only in passing we want to note that the constitution of individuality also generates typical tautological and paradoxical problems of self-referential identification. Similarly, strategies of de-tautologization and de-paradoxization and of meaningful self-identification have to be devised for personal systems. As an example, consider the semantic career of the "unconscious" defining individuality or theories of dual or multiple, i.e., personal *and* social identities.

All of this shows that the individual is no longer understood as a unique part of nature but in opposition to society.

Conversely, society can then be distinguished from the individual as a collectivity.⁴ "Collectivity" may refer to very different ideas: to the population of human beings, to nations, to social order, or to historically varying social formations such as "capitalism." Conceptual clarity, however, is less important here than the underlying distinction that permits identifying the "nature of the social"—the distinction between society or collectivity and individuality. Once this basic distinction is accepted, information can be processed, and various ideological self-descriptions of society can express the concrete meaning and implications of this distinction. That is, since society and individuality are identified in opposition to each other, individual dissatisfaction with society can be expressed in diverse ideological contexts (e.g., conservative or progressive contexts). The basic distinction between society and individuality leaves sufficient room for ideological systematizations of dissatisfaction and hopelessness without excluding the possibility of changes. In the second half of the nineteenth century, this distinction finally ruins the belief in natural progress and inspires newly emerging sociology to analyze the individual within the structural contexts of modern society (Rammstedt, 1985).

Comparing the two distinctions between state/society and individual/collectivity, it is easy to see that both fulfill the same function: making information processing possible while at the same time blocking insight into the unity of the differences posited and, thus, into the problems of tautology and paradox. The processing of information in the ongoing self-observation of society utilizes, confirms, and transforms these "distinction directives." What can be distinguished by means of these distinctions will become "information." But while the distinction between state and society does not transcend the social order and can thus only identify subsystems,

⁴ The ideological opposition of individualism to collectivism did not occur before the second half of the nineteenth century. Apparently, this distinction represents the attempt to differentiate further between the positions opposing individualism (socialism/communism/collectivism); see Rauscher (1976).

the distinction between the individual and society posits an external reference point that serves as a standard for evaluating social conditions. Up to the era of the "Frankfurt School," this procedure created a theory of society that was based on the opposition between individual and society. This basic framework is abandoned and replaced by new distinctions such as between work and interaction or between system and lifeworld not before Habermas and the "intersubjectivation" and "proceduralization" of the subject. But these new distinctions are only different ways to conceal the crucial unity underlying all distinctions.⁵

But let us return once more to the problem of ideology. In his programmatic introduction to the dictionary "Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe," Koselleck (1972) assumes that since the mid-eighteenth century, old European social and political semantics have undergone a fundamental change of meaning. Koselleck argues that the characteristic feature of this change in meaning was the fact that many concepts were now understood as being temporal and ideological. Koselleck's argument supports the stronger hypothesis that ideologies are in fact characterized by temporalization. Ideologies replace the reference to nature by the reference to historical time and to the present condition of society (Willke, 1974). In a certain sense, temporalization and "ideologization" cooperate in compensating the loss of realism that becomes unavoidable as soon as social structure is no longer compatible with only one privileged representation.

Differences in references to historical time reflect differences between conservative and progressive ideologies. To be sure, the

experience of accelerating social change sabotages the simple antagonism between progressive and conservative ideologies and transforms it into the question of whether the basic internal dynamics of society such as market economy or uncensored scientific research should be maintained or whether some control is necessary here to preserve elementary human interests. Rapid social change may lead to an exchange of topics between the left and right wings so that formerly conservative topics such as cultural pessimism, critique of technology, and resort to the "state" are now primarily discussed in the leftist camp.⁶ But reference to historical time and interpretations of the present social condition are still crucial for distinguishing ideological options (since they must not, as you recall, refer to differences between tautological and paradoxical identity reflections). The exchange of topics proves that concrete ideological commitments are not that important; they only serve to implement a more fundamental antagonism that must not reveal its rationale and that is therefore constantly actualized in the form of interpretations of the present situation of society.

The temporalization of societal self-descriptions and the observation of rapid social change attack the distinction between progressive and conservative orientations. The conservatives start out with disappointment, the progressives end up with disappointment, and both suffer from time and agree therein. The crisis is now ubiquitous. In the extreme case the self-description of society boils down to a "definition of the situation" which always leaves room for controversy, even if the data are indisputable. Depending on expectations and respective ideological opponents, a given level of social welfare is either fairly remarkable or insufficient. Therefore, one either finds reasons to point to the costs and unintended consequences of additional expenditures or to stir up the demand, and a controversy results even if the facts are agreed upon. Similarly, as the debate on "postmodernity" illustrates, intellectual reflection degenerates. The progressive side laments about their goals not being taken seriously anymore and switches from "not yet" to "not anymore," while the conservative side profits from this change and is

⁵ See Habermas' (1985) stern critique of the paradoxical consequences of a subject-oriented program for enlightenment. But his critique raises the question of whether there can be a nonparadoxical concept. Habermas claims that the new paradigm of communicative understanding avoids problems of paradox, but how can self-reference be restricted so as to avoid paradoxes? It seems to me that the *historical* analysis of the self-enlightening subject and its opponents prevents a sufficiently *abstract* analysis of the paradoxical problems of self-referential systems in general. The paradigm of communicative understanding is presented in a polemic way that hardly evidences the readiness for communication and understanding. As a description of societal self-descriptions, Habermas' paradigm turns paradoxical itself. And it is precisely this problem that is addressed by the mode of observation we call—following Heinz von Foerster—"second-order cybernetics."

⁶ See Renn (1985) regarding the critique of technology and Grimm (1980) regarding positive law and the state.

therefore in the position to renounce further reflection. Such an extensive temporalization still achieves what we expect of ideologies: to de-paradoxize or to de-tautologize societal identity. That is, as opposed to "pure" tautologies and paradoxes, ideologies offer specific descriptions of society and recommend particular programs for action. But the debate on postmodernity will soon become boring since it does not explore new lines of thought and since it simply lets the present time pass.

Once comprehensive self-descriptions of society become more problematic because of the transition to functional differentiation, changes can not only be observed in the temporal but also in the factual dimension. As a result of the loss of a natural and unchallenged representation, society has to deal with a larger amount of contingency. That is, although no societal macroactor can safely be identified, "decisions" become more important than ever before. Particularly, market order and democracy institutionalize more selective decisions. Correspondingly, paradoxes are treated as *moral* paradoxes, implying that they are observed as paradoxes resulting from decisions. The market economy demonstrates that morally reprehensible, egoistic, profit-oriented behavior may nevertheless have virtuous consequences. The opposite is true for politics directed at public opinion. The French Revolution tells its "conservative" observers that the best intentions may have the worst consequences. Thus, in its moral version, the paradox is reversely distributed to the economy and to politics, to society and the state, and is provided there with corresponding institutions (e.g., contractual liberties, elections). The program for Restoration (which is paradoxical itself) is institutionalization of freedom.

But if institutionalization of freedom is adopted as the program for political decisions and for ideology (implying, at first, societal control by means of ideas), an unprecedented need for new semantic certainties emerges. There must be an "inviolable level" (Hofstadter, 1979) of order which resists the play of contingencies and which is not disturbed but reaffirmed by paradoxes and tautologies. There is no position outside of society from which to communicate, but a system can internally test semantic references which may be treated as absolute. This is the starting

point for the semantic career of the concept of "values" around the mid-nineteenth century.

Values are "blind spots" that make it possible for systems to observe and act (James, 1983). The value-ladenness of a value defines the position from which to observe, demand, formulate interests, and prepare to act. Distinctions between values and alternative values or between values and undesirable conditions are required for observing. Similarly, actions require that values be included into the semantic systems stabilizing motivations. Values improve the depth, accuracy, and range of observation and orientation but at the same time invite others to observe one's observations and orientations. Values do not express consensus but motivate others to observe one's observations critically.

The conceptual history of "value" has not yet been thoroughly analyzed. However, the concept is not very likely to directly stem from the aristocratic ethos of "valeur."⁷ Rather, it is more likely to originate in economics since economics has always attempted to ground the contingency and flexibility of prices in a more stable sphere of underlying values.⁸ Basically, the only problem was to generalize this functional context, and since the mid-nineteenth century, this generalization has occurred through extending the concept of value to moral, literary, and aesthetic areas.⁹ Eventually, the concept of value denotes preferences the validity of which can safely be assumed in social communication without having to face disagreement. As proven "eigenvalues" of the system, values turn out to be stable even in the context of self-referential operations (von Foerster, 1981).

Apparently, the most conspicuous characteristic of values is that they can be communicated inconspicuously. Corresponding to their presumed absolute validity, values are implied as allusions in social communication. One does not tell others that one favors

⁷ Abbé Morrelet (1980), though, observes such a change from "force" or "vigueur" to "utilite" in the eighteenth century.

⁸ Of course, this attempt was made in very different theories; see Kaulla (1906).

⁹ A very broad concept of value can already be observed in the eighteenth century (as an example, see Permetti, 1748, whose definition comprises obligations and pleasures, honor and life, health and wealth), but it was located in the context of a utilitarian anthropology.

justice; one simply demands more justice in the distribution of income. While communication itself focuses on issues that can be negotiated and disagreed upon, values remain latent in communication. Values are reproduced and stabilized through indirect communication. Since sufficiently general values are easy to find, the latency of values can also be used tactically to suppress disagreement.

One cannot question the validity of values, but one can interpret them. Modern hermeneutics seems to have been invented as a pendant to the new sphere of inviolate values. Emerging as some kind of reflexive theory of the religious system, then subjectified, and finally turning into a philology, modern hermeneutics channels the indisputable into the form of a circle ("hermeneutic circle") in which it is able to orient itself. The hermeneutic approach also denotes an elaborate form of tautology and paradox or a development of self-reference. More specifically, the hermeneutic form of self-reference is chosen if one wants to avoid the option for one or another ideological discourse.

However, the hermeneutic approach to the concept of value has its own consequences and costs. Contrary to common belief, hermeneutics deprives the concept of value of its practical significance. It symbolizes the autopoiesis of communication—but nothing more. The hermeneutic approach does not permit inferring correct behavior since this would require a resolution of value conflicts that always remains contingent and cannot itself be safely grounded in an "inviolable level" of values.¹⁰ This latter argument is only an alternative formulation for the generally accepted insight that there is no transitive order of values that could be validated as a preestablished hierarchy; that is, regardless of particular circumstances.

In the area of values, the reduction of time horizons to a "definition of the situation" corresponds to what has been observed—partly in very misleading terms such as "postmaterialist"—as global value change. Apparently, this value change is based on a rapidly growing awareness of global risks that is being nourished by the ecological problems of modern society as well as by the difficulties in maintaining the level of social

welfare.¹¹ Particularly in the form of fears or concerns for others or for everyone, anxiety is no longer taboo but a public issue: one could even characterize present times as the "era of unmasked anxiety" (Frohlich, 1982). This characterization does not imply assumptions about the states of minds of concrete individuals, but it does tell us something about value references in public rhetoric. As a public issue, anxiety advances to a substitute a priori. That is, anxiety cannot be disputed, refuted, or cured. It always appears authentic in communication. It is impossible to reply "you are wrong" to someone saying she is afraid. Anxiety thus deserves and creates respect or at least tolerance; it makes disagreement incommunicable and thus serves as the focus for the "new values."

At the same time, anxiety blocks insight into the problems of tautology and paradox, the pure reflection of which, as stated before, would block communication. Anxiety, on the other hand, releases communication, with its new values profiting from the relief this release provides. Anxiety releasing communication may even lead to a previously unknown form of unreasonable loquacity. But still, we can detect here a way of de-paradoxizing societal identity problems that no longer requires an ideology in the classical sense of the term. Ideologies have always been required to offer more than simple value recommendations. They were equipped with cognitive components, i.e., with descriptions of social conditions and problems. Possibly, the cognitive component can now be reduced to the universal formula of anxiety directing the selection of descriptions, "scenarios," world models, and general summons. But this formula would terminate the self-description of society before it detected its own arbitrariness.

VI

Until now we have dealt with tautologies and paradoxes as logically equivalent yet reversed schemas of observations and descriptions. However, this assumption turns out to be problematic if one regards tautologies as special cases of paradoxes. Indeed, tautologies turn out to be paradoxes while the reverse is not true.

¹⁰ See Luhmann (1984) for a discussion of the necessity for distinguishing between values and programs.

¹¹ "The main principle of the new values appears to be that of avoiding risks" (Bühl, 1981, p. 153).

VII

Tautologies are distinctions that do not distinguish. They explicitly negate that what they distinguish really makes a difference. Tautologies thus block observations. They are always based on a dual observation schema: something is what it is. This statement, however, negates the posited duality and asserts an identity. Tautologies thus negate what makes them possible in the first place, and, therefore, the negation itself becomes meaningless.

If we take this consideration seriously, we can no longer assume a functional equivalence of tautologies and paradoxes or of de-paradoxization and de-tautologization. We can then account for the frequently reported observation that the intellect has a certain preference for the leftist side of the political and intellectual spectrum. Apparently, it is more productive to deal with the resolution of paradoxes than with the development of tautologies (which should not lead to the wrong conclusion that de-paradoxization generates true ideological knowledge).

Therefore, there is all the more reason to conduct further research on ideologies, on temporalizations, and possibly on other solutions to the problem of self-descriptions based on paradox and de-paradoxization. The main question underlying this research would be under what conditions can de-paradoxization be developed productively instead of pathologically or as a creative instead of a vicious circle (Krippendorff, 1984). Since all self-descriptions of society are either based on paradox or on tautology, the problem is not to avoid paradox or tautology but to interrupt self-referential reflection so as to avoid *pure* tautologies and paradoxes and to suggest meaningful societal self-descriptions. The well-known problem of "harmless" self-references (following the pattern of "this sentence is a sentence") becomes less important then since, as we stated, these appear paradoxical to an observer, too, and thus must be dealt with in the same manner as paradoxes. That is, de-tautologizations are de-paradoxizations, and in both cases the problem is to transform infinite into finite information charges. Correspondingly, the logical-mathematical way of dealing with this problem will have to be revised: paradoxes do not originate in (inevitable) vicious circles, but such circles result from unsuccessful attempts to de-paradoxize (Chihara, 1973).

Each observation of systems that observe themselves faces the question of the inherent limits to self-referential operations. Especially in the philosophical theory of truth, it is a well-known fact that allowing for unrestricted self-reference leads to tautologies and paradoxes. Observing and describing the self-descriptions of modern society one gains the impression that modern society confronts this problem but is unable to realize it *as a* problem.

Several evasive strategies can be observed. One of them, the discourse on the "subject," simulates the problem for a case that is external to society. This makes it possible for society to cultivate the illusion of being constituted in a deficient but not paradoxical way. Even Jurgen Habermas' (1985) brilliant and keen exposure of the paradoxical self-enlightenment of the subject depends on the externalization of self-reference. Habermas presents the paradigm of communicative intersubjectivity as a regulative ideal implied in communication itself—as if only the subjects positing their own rationality faced the problem of self-reference. But since we know that unrestricted self-reference is impossible for purely logical reasons, the idealization of intersubjective communication will only interpret the process of self-referential constitution, and then the question arises: why does self-reference have to operate in this way but not another?¹²

This evaluation of Habermas' theory corresponds to the results of our previous argument. Societal self-descriptions that are unable to describe what is in fact indescribable make use of semantic expedients that conceal this very fact but nevertheless permit self-description. Certain distinctions that identify society in opposition to something else (the "state," "Gemeinschaft," or the "individual") have performed alibi functions in this way. Ideologization and temporalization make this alibi function precarious but not transparent. Values provide the corresponding explanation: new "inviolable levels" are required if everything appears to be contingent and if communication itself must test what

¹² Even if it were correct, the argument that this idealization is *implied* in communication does not solve the problem since *self-reference is also implied in communication*.

will work as a starting point for the development of self-reference.

The question arises of how "sociological enlightenment" observing and describing the self-referential constitution of society is still possible under these circumstances. Which semantic system can be stabilized in such a process of describing descriptions of descriptions? Especially, what are the implications of the fact that societal observations and descriptions are possible only as self-observations and self-descriptions since no individual mind could ever be a "subject" in the sense that it was the only basis for such observation and descriptions.

The basis for answering this question lies in the assumption that in society there are no unobserved operations—similar to the observation that communication cannot be terminated by communication. Maintaining and continuing the autopoiesis of society, communication is always observed in terms of distinctions that apply to both communication and observation (for example, *this* has been said and not what I expected). On this factual basis the difference between operations and observations can be assumed to be universal and to perpetually reproduce itself. The autopoiesis of society cannot be continued without simultaneously creating new possibilities for observation.¹³ The universal validity of this hypothesis implies that observations themselves are only possible as autopoietic operations or, in the case of social systems, as communications.

The distinction between "natural" and "artificial" restriction of self-reference is based on this distinction between operations and observations.¹⁴ Those interruptions of self-reference which the system regards as necessary conditions for the possibility of its operations may be called "natural." On the other hand, "artificial" restriction of self-reference are those which are perceived as contingent, i.e., as selections from other alternatives. Natural interruptions of self-reference thus block insight into the paradoxical and tautological problems of self-referential identifications. In fact, they make

these problems invisible. Artificial interruptions, on the other hand, allow for this insight but postulate that the paradox be resolved.

The distinction natural/artificial (necessary/contingent) always refers to particular systems. Moreover, it is subject to evolutionary changes or learning processes. If a system is able to discover new "inviolable levels" that serve to de-paradoxize its identity, semantic systems deemed necessary may become contingent. European enlightenment was an evolutionary process of this kind that failed, however, to develop its own self-reference through the semantic system of subjective Reason. Furthermore, the distinction necessary/contingent helps explain how previously undoubted foundations of societal semantics are suddenly suspected of being contingent once evolution changes the pattern of social differentiation.

Most importantly, however, this distinction helps clarify the relations between observations (self-observations) and operations and, consequently, the relations between society and its own self-reflections and descriptions. An observer can realize that self-referential systems are constituted in a paradoxical way. This insight itself, however, makes observation impossible since it postulates an autopoietic system whose autopoiesis is blocked. Therefore, the assumption of pure and unrestricted self-reference transfers the paradox to the observation itself. Such an observation would contradict its own intentions. Therefore, realizing the necessity of interruption in processes of self-referential constitution de-paradoxizes the object of observation and—at the same time—the observation itself. Independent from all a priori conditions for the possibility of knowledge, this insight unites the observation and its object and thus makes possible societal self-observations and descriptions.

The distinction between natural and artificial restrictions of self-reference is very important since it permits maintaining the distinction between observations and operation, although both are possible only as systems (i.e., as developed or de-paradoxized operations.) The distinction natural/artificial can be utilized in such a way that an observation can interpret as artificial and contingent what the system itself assumes to be natural and necessary. For example, an observer may examine how a system creates

¹³ It can be shown that communicating systems identify action by means of attributions in order to observe themselves (Luhmann, 1984).

¹⁴ Löfgren (1978) implicitly proposes this distinction without suggesting that it was logically possible to decide whether one is dealing with natural or artificial forms of de-paradoxization.

the impression of its self-determinations being natural, necessary, and lacking functional alternatives. He may then, for example, search for functional equivalents for the notion of God serving to de-paradoxize the religious system (Luhmann, 1985b). To use Heinz von Foerster's (1979) formulation, in this way an observer can realize that the observed system cannot realize that it is unable to realize what cannot be realized. This insight marks the real epistemic gain second-order cybernetics has to offer. Any different goal of sociological enlightenment would only lead into the well-known self-contradictions.

We do not claim that von Foerster's formula expresses ultimate truth. But we do claim that it defines the starting point for a theory determining which type of societal self-description can be proven as adequate even if revealed as artificial and contingent.

VIII

What is real can also be observed. Therefore, in the course of history experiences gained by certain social formations from reflecting upon themselves accumulate. Since modern society began to observe and describe itself in the eighteenth century, it is obviously more capable of doing so now than ever before. In any case, the negative aspects of modernity that have been observed since the very beginning of the bourgeois movement can now neither be interpreted as transitory phenomena nor as unavoidable costs of the progress of civilization. Not before today is society fully confronted with the consequences of its structural selections. This is especially true for the ecological problems resulting from its own rationality. Therefore, it seems close at hand to push self-observations and self-descriptions up to the point of an obviously paradoxical conclusion: that one wants what one does not want.

Searching for positions from which to describe modern society, one encounters social movements. Very typically, these movements attempt to fight society from within society just as if they were external to society. After time-consuming and consequential but unsuccessful attempts to organize around a particular phenomenon—keyword "capitalism"—the so-called "new social movements" of today develop a much more radical perspective and thus fit into a historical

situation that provides better opportunities for self-descriptions. New social movements pursue broader concerns and, therefore, draw upon more heterogeneous motivations (which has thwarted many attempts to interpret them as one unified movement). They are radical and nonradical at the same time. They are concerned with preserving single trees and with societal change, with avoiding nonnatural radioactivity and with a different form of life. Often, these movements display contradictory orientations. For example, they pursue ecological goals while criticizing the purely economic rationality of their opponents. Or these movements are internally cleaved. For example, the issue of equality put forward by the women's movement articulates a purely bourgeois demand, while the search for a semantics of femininity expresses the concern for a wholly different form of life. These movements embody the possibility of a critique of society that is much more radical than anything Marx could envision and dare. They are broadly concerned with many consequences of the differentiation of functional systems, and if they do have a radical intention, then it would be the critique of functional differentiation.

The critique of functional differentiation, however, reaches the limits of alternativity. A society can imagine a change in its principle of stability, in its pattern of differentiation, or of drawing systemic boundaries as nothing but catastrophe. Like the past critique of the feudal order, the critique of functional differentiation remains a moral critique that is unable to indicate alternative lines of evolution. It is indisputable that improvements can always be made and that people always sin against other people. But in this way the new social movements become inevitably preoccupied with the issues of the day and are different only in their less complicated ways of dealing with them. Their counter-publicity depends on a vivid exchange with the bourgeois publicity against which it seeks to demarcate itself. New social movements demand public recognition by over-exaggerating their morality and by choosing unconventional techniques of self-presentation. But they are recognized anyway, and this always occurs within society, not against it.

The secret of alternative movements is that they cannot offer any alternatives. They have to conceal this fact from others and from themselves, and in this way they contribute to

de-paradoxization. And apparently, this contribution turns out to be rather productive.

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