
Discipline in Dialogue

Articles are invited for the Discipline in Dialogue section of ARC, addressing issues of method and theory in the academic study of religion, pedagogical reflections, state-of-the-art reviews of the discipline or its sub-disciplines, and responses and rejoinders. This section is meant to offer a forum for stimulating discussion and debate.

The Spiritual Foundations of Modern Systems Theory: Niklas Luhmann's *libertas indifferentiae*

Stefan Roszbach

University of Kent at Canterbury

Jürgen Habermas (1929-) and Niklas Luhmann (1927-1998) are the two most important post-war German social theorists. Thousands of sociology students in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Germany had to work their way through the so-called “Habermas-Luhmann debate” (Habermas & Luhmann 1971), and few German students of social theory today manage to escape the labyrinth of Luhmann’s theory. Yet, while Habermas has many readers and interpreters in the English-speaking world, comparatively few of Luhmann’s works have been translated into English. Of his major theoretical works, only the 1984 volume *Soziale Systeme* (Social Systems) is at present available in English (Luhmann 1995). The unfortunate consequence of this situation is that the reception of Luhmann outside Germany is not only delayed but also effectively rendered impossible as most readers first encounter Luhmann through Habermas’s misleading criticism.

Luhmann's work, comprising more than 40 books and approximately 400 articles, represents one of the most sophisticated and elaborate attempts to "interpret" systems theory in the context of the development of modern society and individual consciousness. Luhmann, who came to sociology by accident (Rossbach 1993, 82-86), spent more than 40 years of his life formulating and refining his theory, carefully pursuing the implications of his ideas and concepts. In contrast to Habermas, he was not interested in polemics. Instead, as he explained, he was fascinated by the idea that a theory could grow more complex if it was given time to develop according to its own standards (Luhmann 1987c, 135). The "theory" he envisioned was not a proposition that could be formulated, once and for all, in one statement, article or book. Instead, the theory was to exemplify its contents; it was to be a dynamic social system, a self-referential process that would be able to return to and, if necessary, problematize its own beginnings. Accordingly, as a self-exegesis, his work progressed to the extent that he was able to understand and articulate its implications. It is therefore far from surprising that he quickly lost interest in the exchange with Habermas. Luhmann had little time to respond to his critics because he was too busy interpreting the meaning of what he considered to be his departure from "ontological metaphysics."

It is ironic that the importance of Luhmann's work rests on his stubbornness, on his preoccupation with his own ideas. For his work allows us to see the full implications of some of the assumptions underlying systems theory. Luhmann shows us where these assumptions would lead us if we were to adopt them. Moreover, if we are prepared to accept that systems theory can be popular only to the extent that it resonates with the wider intellectual climate, then Luhmann suddenly becomes a "symptom" of this very climate—a symptom, in fact, that analyses itself, not unlike Nietzsche, who knew that he himself was the primary evidence of the nihilism he diagnosed in his surroundings. Thus, Luhmann's work gains in significance to the extent that his concerns are mirrored in the works of other contemporary theorists. Jacques Derrida's "deconstructivism," for example, is treated by Luhmann as another variant of what he calls "second order observation" (Luhmann 1993a, 250,258; Luhmann 1992c).

The purpose of this article is to highlight the spiritual foundations of Luhmann's theory. Given that the evolution of his theory was driven by the attempt to clarify the meaning and implications of its underlying assumptions, it is clear that our attention must turn to these very assumptions. I will argue that these assumptions are best understood as a "vision" that stood at the very centre of Luhmann's work from its beginnings. His theoretical work can be understood as an articulation and exegesis of this "vision."

The paper is divided into five parts. The first part outlines the starting point for Luhmann's work, his critique of Talcott Parsons' functional method and the problematization of "identity" and "being." The second part of the paper explains the concept of "autopoiesis," on which Luhmann's alternative theory design is based. Drawing on Luhmann's self-understanding as articulated in his publications as well as in interviews, the third part of the paper will present the "vision" underlying Luhmann's quest. I will argue that Luhmann is representative of a tradition of thought known as "contemplative gnosis." The fourth part shows how Luhmann's understanding of world society as the "totality of communication" is a mere corollary of this "vision." Luhmann's discussion of "society" is particularly revealing in that it shows that his "vision," normally the driving force of his questioning, could also cloud his judgment. There is a fundamental flaw in Luhmann's understanding of society because he failed to explain how the "totality of communication" could possibly constitute a "system." The final, concluding part of the paper places Luhmann's "vision" in a historical context and examines its contemporary appeal.

Luhmann's Point of Departure

Luhmann's starting point was a critique of the "functional method" as practised by Talcott Parsons. In his very first publication (1958), Luhmann observed how functionalism, when misunderstood as a method providing causal explanations, would always lead into the well-known circularity where everything happening within a given system was causally reduced to the necessity of preserving the system (Luhmann 1958). The circularity was to be avoided, Luhmann

argued, by re-interpreting the functional method as a method of “searching for alternatives.” For Luhmann, the reference to a “function” never prescribed in what specific way it was to be fulfilled. Instead, a “function” defined a (limited) range of possible causes that might all bring about the desired effect. Functional analysis, thus, could not be a search for causal laws understood as a relation between one cause and one effect; functional analysis had to be conceived as a search for functionally equivalent causes with regard to one problematic effect (Luhmann 1958, 98-100). In other words, functional analysis was a search for possibilities of replacement and substitution (Luhmann 1962, 13-14).

According to Luhmann, this slight shift of perspective, if taken seriously, entailed a departure from “ontological metaphysics.” “Ontological metaphysics” operated on the basis of a distinction between “true being” and “non-being” and thereby excluded phenomena of becoming, vanishing, and movement from “reality.” Accordingly, ontological metaphysics had no room for contingency, i.e. for the realm of the possible. This way of thinking approached the world in an abstract manner, looking for constant features rather than principles of variation. In contrast, Luhmann’s re-defined functional method cannot define “identity” as an exclusion of other possibilities; rather, identity becomes an organisation or order of other possibilities. In other words, identity is not a self-sufficient substance but a co-ordinating synthesis, a *system* that always contains references to other possibilities and therefore remains fragile, problematic (Luhmann 1962, 15,26). The essence of things cannot be defined by, or reduced to, some given kernel of substance; things are defined by the positions they occupy in a texture of other possibilities, i.e. by the conditions of their replacement (Luhmann 1968b, 8).

Contemplating the history of Western philosophy, Luhmann noted that 2000 years of searching for “essence” had led to a universal problematization of identity, unity, stability or of being in general. From now on, identity had to be understood as a *system*, i.e. as a structured openness for other possibilities (Luhmann 1964b, 44-45). It is important to appreciate that Luhmann’s understanding of “system” drew on a cluster of concepts that included, as noted above, “being,”

“identity,” “problem.” A system was not, therefore, a pre-conditional or unconditional entity; it did not stand for a first or ultimate cause but instead represented a problematic invariance which required stabilisation. And this stabilisation, as a process, always occurred in an unstable environment and could proceed along various possible paths (Luhmann 1964a, 395-397).

By implication, a universal systems theory based on these assumptions turns everything that appears self-evident into problems and all “essences” into functions. Understood as a methodological prescription, such a theory demands that one finds for every “thing” that *is*, i.e. for every identity, a reference point from which it can be questioned with regard to its *replaceability*. For Luhmann, this change of perspective entailed an advance in rationality because it was not based on the conviction that being [*das Seiende*], in some of its qualities, would remain what it was. The new perspective, in contrast, found reassurance in the conviction that being, under certain circumstances, did not have to remain itself. Luhmann noted that this perspective would bring a specific kind of freedom, a *libertas indifferentiae*, attainable through cognisance [*Erkenntnis*], as it would prevent us from holding on to “essences” where there were none. “Indifference,” therefore, was the key feature of this newly found “freedom” (Luhmann 1964b, 47).

Thus, Luhmann positioned himself at the very end of an unsuccessful 2000-year search for “essence.” From now on, contingency had to be understood as the very centre of being. But if Luhmann’s systems could not take anything for granted, because everything was contingent, then the things or unities or elements that they did take for granted in their everyday operations had to be *self-created*. Thus, Luhmann was able to adopt the notion of “autopoiesis” so easily because it perfectly expressed one of the main implications of what he took to be a new understanding of “being.” For autopoietic systems are exactly this: systems that generate not only their own structures but also their elements.

Autopoiesis: A Brief Summary

In the early 1980s “autopoiesis” became a key concept in Luhmann’s theory. Invented by the Chilean biologists Humberto Maturana and Francesco Varela, the term “autopoiesis” was meant to reflect a radicalization of the idea of “self-organisation.” Self-organisation means that systems produce, maintain and change their own structures; autopoiesis assumes, in addition, that systems generate not only their structures but also their elementary components. In other words, everything that an autopoietic system uses as a “unity” [*Einheit*]¹—its elements, structures, processes etc.—is produced by the system itself. And it is this very activity of production and reproduction from products that defines the system and its unity.

The operation of the system corresponds to the continuing existence of a distinction: the distinction between the system and its environment. According to Luhmann, the system’s environment is always more complex than the system in the sense that the environment has more references and possibilities than the system can actualise. Complexity, therefore, is enforced selectivity. The system responds to the irritations provided by the environment in a selective manner. Autopoiesis means that, in the first instance, these selections are determined by the system rather than by the environment. This is best explained through a metaphor. A few weeks ago I had a dream in which I saw myself preparing a dinner for my wife and myself. I saw me cooking, laying the table, lighting the candles when suddenly my alarm clock rang. However, instead of waking me up, the noise was incorporated into the dream as the longed-for doorbell: my wife had arrived, the dinner began, and the dream continued. The complex relationship between the noise (the alarm clock) and the dream (the dinner) illustrates the principle of autopoiesis. For it is the dream which according to its own internal dynamics is able to pick up “noise” from its environment and transform it into an “irritation.” The environment offers stimuli and perturbations but it cannot determine their effect on the system. Rather, it is the system (the dream) that makes its own future dependent on “selected” irritations provided by its environment. Hence, for an autopoietic system, openness is a result of the system’s

operation. Autopoietic systems are self-referentially closed, i.e. they evolve according to their internal dynamics, and in the course of their evolution they may, or may not, produce openness. They produce openness on the basis of closure. And they reproduce themselves precisely by submitting themselves to this self-reproduced selectivity.

Luhmann distinguishes between three different types of systems: living systems, conscious (psychic) systems and communication (social) systems. They are distinguished according to the three different modes of autopoietic reproduction that they use: life, consciousness and communication. Only conscious and communication systems are meaning-based systems in that they are able to make their operation dependent on an internal representation of their own and their environment's complexity. In the above metaphor, the dream has its own dynamics, its own "meaning world," in which certain irritations have meaning and are therefore "selected" by the system.

Luhmann conceptualises inter-systemic relations as "structural coupling." Again, this is best explained in a metaphor. In the sciences of complexity in general and in chaos theory in particular, the "butterfly effect" is known as a situation in which a butterfly, happily beating its wings over Canterbury, "causes" a local turbulence that is amplified until it becomes a hurricane over the Atlantic six months later. The "butterfly effect" is an illustration of what scientists call "sensitive dependence on initial conditions," a situation in which microscopic fluctuations may induce macroscopic, systemic changes. Yet, where chaos theory emphasizes that "asymmetrical" causal relationships are at work—very small things causing great changes—autopoiesis would interpret the situation in a different manner, emphasizing instead the "unintended cooperation" of the butterfly and weather system. For it is the weather system which, at some point or other and always according to its own internal dynamics, opens itself and provides the butterfly with a window of opportunity to influence global weather conditions. The butterfly needs this "unintended" and coincidental cooperation of the weather in order to make a difference that is equally "unintended." The situation, in fact, is symmetrical with causality moving in both directions, from the weather to the butterfly and

back. The outcome, the hurricane, is the result of a “structural coupling” of two systems.

Structural coupling means that two or more systems “share” the same elements. The butterfly creates a local turbulence as it moves in the air, and the same turbulence is “used” by the weather system to decide its macroscopic future. However, although systems may share elements, the meaning of these elements will be very different depending on the systems concerned. For example, functional (communication) subsystems of modern society such as economics, politics and science often deal with the same realities but through the different prisms of their respective meaning worlds. The discovery of nuclear fission, for example, is an “event” in the systems of economics, science and politics, and yet the meaning of the event differs in each system. In science, the event is a scientific discovery leading to further research; in politics the event may require a change in energy policies, and in economics the event may signify a profound transformation of the energy markets, leading to new profit opportunities. Accordingly, the same event may trigger very different evolutions in the systems concerned, and the overall result of the co-evolution of these systems may well be outside the intentions or functions of the individual systems. Thus, “sharing elements” does not mean that systems “agree” or “understand” each other. Although systems may develop theories about each other, such theories too ultimately follow the dynamics of the meaning world of the systems producing the theories. Therefore, “understanding” cannot be an empirical phenomenon because the system’s access to reality is always mediated through its meaning world. Applied to conscious systems, this simply means that I will never know whether someone else thinks the same as I do. There is a sense, then, in which systems remain “black boxes” to each other at all times. Yet, according to Luhmann, structural coupling is the only way in which systems can be in “contact” with other systems.

A simple (and indeed simplified) example of a communication system would be the Economics Department at the University of Kent. As an autopoietic system, the system produces its own elements. In this case, the system uses “mathematical models” as the basic, undecomposable elements of its reproduction. Each model invites the pro-

duction of further models, which elaborate, clarify, confuse, and criticize etc. previous models. The autopoiesis of the system consists precisely in this ongoing and unquestioned use of mathematical models as “elements.” To say that these elements are “undecomposable” means that their status as “elements” cannot be questioned by the system. While using elements as elements, the system cannot question them. An outside observer could, of course, “deconstruct” the unity of these elements and find that their unity is a conglomerate of assumptions about epistemology, life, the world, the universe and everything, but the system, as long as it operates, takes and must take all this for granted. To the extent that it “accepts” or “takes for granted” the unity of its elements, the system runs a risk—the risk, for example, of being considered naïve—but only by accepting that risk is the system able to continue operating and to build up complexity. By accepting elements as elements, the system reduces the complexity of its environment, and yet this reduction of complexity is the precondition for a building up of internal complexity. An implication of this is that all systems have their “blind spots”: they cannot see beyond or beneath their “elements.” Given that the use of these elements as elements is precisely what determines the system’s “identity,” “unity,” as well as its relationship to its environment, Luhmann concluded that, for the system, the very ground of its existence—the system/environment distinction—remains invisible.

‘Die bodenlose Welt’: Luhmann’s Vision of a Groundless World

Luhmann mentioned “autopoiesis” for the first time in the article “Autopoiesis, Handlung und kommunikative Verständigung” [“Autopoiesis, action and communicative understanding”] (Luhmann 1982a). This early exposition of the concept was as yet unsupported by secondary concepts developed later and thus gave a particularly concise and clear presentation of the vision underlying Luhmann’s appropriation of “autopoiesis.” According to Luhmann, modern science had the capacity to dissolve all inviolate levels and thus proved that the world itself was groundless [*bodenlos*]. Whatever a system used as “elementary,” as inviolate level, as undecomposable, was exactly this only because the

system decided to resist the process of dissolution, which seemed implicit in the world's groundlessness. The "production" of these elements was thus a form of resistance, a (local and temporary) "negation" of entropy, a warding off against the fall in the abyss of a groundless world. The ground upon which a system found itself had to be self-produced because the world within which all this took place was groundless. In this sense, the production of elements manifested a negation—a negation that would give the elements their positivity. Accordingly, there was always the possibility of problematizing the elements from outside the system because the elements were elements only for the very system that they constituted.

The systems emerge from, or differentiate themselves from a groundless world without essences, a uniform, undifferentiated, dark nothingness—an abyss or, as the 17th century mystic Jakob Boehme would call it, an *Ungrund* (Weeks 1991; O'Regan 2002). The differentiation of the system corresponds to the introduction of a distinction into the underlying uniformity. For Luhmann, everything started with a distinction. Systems came into existence once the world, the "unmarked space," was "wounded" [*verletzt*—sometimes Luhmann speaks of an *Einkerbung*, a "notching"] by a distinction.

It is instructive to look at the similarities between Luhmann's theory design and the teaching of his favourite mystic, Nicholas of Cusa. On a number of occasions, Luhmann refers to Cusa sympathetically, turning the 15th century thinker almost into a predecessor of modern systems theory (Luhmann 1991, 939, 945; Luhmann 1992b, 107-111; Luhmann 1997, 58n). In fact, the affinity between their concerns is too striking to be accidental. According to Luhmann, one of the main goals of systems theory is to reflect on the necessity of latency, on the inevitability of "blind spots" in all observations (Luhmann 1967a, 68). Systems theory is an attempt to incorporate the "blind spot" in sociological theory, to make it visible (Luhmann 1987b, 30). This is a paradoxical enterprise and leads to the well-known paradoxes in Luhmann's formulations: "Reality is what we do not perceive [*erkennen*] when we perceive reality" (Luhmann 1990c, 51). Luhmann understands "second order cybernetics" as a contemplation of the visibility and invisibility of "blind spots." The sociologist together with the

proponents of second order cybernetics, see "that society cannot see that it cannot see what it cannot see" (Luhmann 1990b, 134).

Similarly, throughout the last 1500 years the concern of mystics was to introduce transcendence into immanence, to make paradoxes visible (Fuchs 1992, 73). Cusa was no exception. In his *Visio Dei* (1453), Cusa explained that it was only through a kind of "notseeing" that God could be seen. God was the absolute ground, where all otherness merged into one, and where difference was identity. God was invisibly visible. He was the *finis sine fine*, the end without end, the *finis infinitus*, the infinite end. Simultaneous, contradictory judgments about God's connection with created things were valid (cf. Miller 1984). The title of Cusa's work, "The Vision of God," entails the same ambiguity as Heinz von Foerster's *Observing Systems* (von Foerster 1984), who had an important influence on Luhmann, and Luhmann's *Beobachtungen der Moderne* ["Observations of Modernity"], merging subject and object of "observation."

For Luhmann, as I noted earlier, the system's "blind spot" was the distinction between system and environment, which remained unobservable for the system as long as it was employed in its operation. In other words, the system's reality was a distinction, which, for the system, was cognitively inaccessible and hence "invisible." As in Cusa's design, the paradoxes of second order observation were "obstructing walls," preventing a return to the original perfect uniformity and oneness of the unmarked space (Luhmann 1993b, 487). Cusa called this oneness "God." Luhmann, in contrast, found it more difficult to give a name to this unity and uniformity. If he referred to it at all, he called it the "world." "Everything can be conceptualised as a system—with the exception of the world, which alone has no boundaries" (Luhmann 1964a, 395). The "world" was not a system because it did not have an "exterior" from which it could distinguish itself (Luhmann 1967b, 115). The world could not be observed because "observation" would introduce a distinction and hence destroy the unity of the world. Nevertheless, the world remained a unity, which systems continuously "carry along" [*eine stets mitgeführte Einheit*] as a horizon (Luhmann 1992a, 384; Luhmann 1997, 57).

How did the unmarked space become a “wounded world”? Luhmann noted that the infliction of the first “wound” was the story of a “Fall.” It is not accidental that Luhmann repeatedly referred to Virgilio Malvezzi's *Ritratto del Privato Politico Christiano* (1635) as an authoritative account of this “wounding” (Luhmann 1987a, 243f; Luhmann 1988a, 265f; Luhmann 1990b, 124f). In Malvezzi's *Ritratto*, Luhmann found the story of Lucifer, who in his attempt to observe God, had to draw a distinction and thereby ended up on the other side of the “good,” turning him into an “evil” force. Luhmann showed great sympathy for the devil in this context because, in his symbolism, whatever “existed,” existed only on the basis of a distinction, on the basis of a destruction of the original “pre-cosmic” oneness. A perfect continuum, like Luhmann's “world,” could not observe itself. If the “world” wanted to observe itself, it would have to differentiate out of itself a closed system, a “devil,” which could produce a distance to the original “world” and “denote” [*bezeichnen*] this “world” (Luhmann 1990a, 303). The demonization of Lucifer was thus the immediate consequence of an epistemological inevitability. There is a sense, then, in which Lucifer had to be understood as a “victim.”

Luhmann referred to Lucifer's problematic fate also in his *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (Luhmann 1997, 847-848). Lucifer had to draw a distinction in order to be able to observe, “from the other side,” God and His creation. The drawing of a distinction within—and against—a unity was the devil's typical mode of observation. The text in *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* is the same, verbatim, as in the San Foca Fassung of the *Theorie der Gesellschaft* (1989), which circulated among the disciples at the time (Luhmann 1989b, 317). However, for the 1997 two-volume work Luhmann added a footnote referring to Malvezzi and, interestingly, to Hegel, who offered a “secularised version” of the same idea.

Having drawn a distinction and having thus distanced himself from God, Lucifer was able to see God's “blind spot,” an insight that made him feel superior to God. Luhmann's theory eclipses Lucifer's problem precisely at this point. The gesture is still the same—second order observation—but Luhmann could see what the devil was unable to see: that even Lucifer's *visio Dei* had its “blind spot.” Second order obser-

vation was not *better* than first order observation because *every* observation introduced "blind spots." And precisely because his "amorality" eclipsed even Lucifer's, Luhmann may have felt justified in showing empathy with the devil. After all, considering the reaction his work provoked in some circles, Luhmann must have been tempted to compare the treatment he received with the prejudices that turned an "innocent" Lucifer into the devil.

Contemplative Gnosis

Beyond or beneath the systems, the distinctions, and the paradoxes there was an "unmarked world." The *actual* world of the systems was a "wounded" world, a negation of the unmarked space. After the infliction of a first "wound," being was nothing but a processing of distinctions. The original unity and uniformity of the unmarked space were effectively lost. They could not be restored through observation because an observation was a distinction and, as such, created "blind spots" even if it observed the "blind spots" of other observations. By implication, conscious systems, as observing systems, were necessarily excluded from reality in the same way as they were excluded "from paradise" (Luhmann 1988b, 294). Distanced from reality, these systems needed to build up their own "internal" complexity, their own "meaning world." Luhmann's systems are totalizing systems because, in his words, a system "cannot avoid operating within a world of its own" (Luhmann 1986a, 179).

Luhmann's systems theory works on the basis of the same principle. Its code system/environment defines a world of its own. It defines the operations by which a system (the theory) differentiates itself within the world in order to observe the world (Luhmann 1990a, 310). Luhmann's theory is one communicative system among many; and like all the other systems, it processes distinctions and hence cannot lead us back to the unmarked "paradise." And yet, the theory's function is precisely to contemplate and "remember" the original unity, oneness and homogeneity of the unmarked space. The theory knows of the inevitability of "blind spots" but it offers a realm within which it is possible to move from one "blind spot" to the next, from first to sec-

and order observation and back. According to Luhmann, “universal theories” had precisely this function: to provide an “experiential field” for the oscillation between self-observation and the observation of the external world (Luhmann 1986a, 188).

The crucial insight provided by this movement is that every observation is a self-limitation; and in order to overcome this limitation one has to continue observing, but in different ways, using different distinctions. Luhmann’s theory evokes the consciousness of a pre-Luciferan unity by providing the flexibility that is required in order to avoid a hypostatisation of particular distinctions. In order to achieve this flexibility, the theory must allow for “re-entries.” In other words, the theory must be able to return to the observations and distinctions that it had taken for granted at earlier stages of its development. Thus, the theory must be able to re-problematize its own beginnings. Luhmann eclipses Lucifer’s problem because his theory is more than a theory, more than a single-shot observation or proposition; the theory *is a social system*. It does not observe and then stop. It continues to operate and to observe and it can therefore “return” to “blind spots” presupposed in earlier observations.

Within the theory there are, then, no limits to “meaningful problematization.” Everything that existed became visible in its positivity as a negation of other possibilities. The unmarked space of possibilities was remembered—if not preserved—by a semantic space in which it was possible to negate such negations (Luhmann 1971a, 85). And as one moved in this semantic space, it became obvious that “all structures are based on deception—deception about the true structure of the world” (Luhmann 1967b, 120). Clearly, however, the “true structure of the world” could not be “restored” or “described” by another axiomatic theory; the description must come in the form of a system, a space, where deceptions could be continuously revealed as deceptions, and negations could be continuously negated. The infinite unity of the world, of the unmarked space, reappeared in the theory in the absence of limits of problematization. And precisely because the world did not offer resting places that could serve as starting points for meaningful existence—precisely, that is, because the world was ground-

less—systems *had to* produce their own elements and create their own meaning.

I am not the first to characterize Luhmann's theory as a variant of mysticism (cf. Reese-Schäfer 1992, 159-160). In fact, Luhmann himself compared his work to "Eastern techniques of meditation" because, as he acknowledged, they too aimed at an "omission of all distinctions" (Luhmann 1989a, 339). He accepted that his design could still be called "metaphysics" but claimed that it was not "ontological metaphysics" (Luhmann 1992a, 384). In this context, it is also worth mentioning that the affinity between the Maturana's "autopoiesis" and "Buddhist logic" was noted prior to Luhmann's adaptation of the concept (cf. Ghose 1980, 204-206).

The meditative practice that Luhmann's theory expresses has a long history and is part of a longstanding tradition. The literary form of the "system," for example, was identified by Hans Jonas as one of the characteristic features of the "Gnostic" systems of late Antiquity. Jonas characterized the 2nd and 3rd centuries as a "hothouse for systems" (Jonas 1966, 173). The literature on Gnosticism is extensive—and controversial—and all I can do here is to draw attention to some of the affinities between Luhmann and the "Gnostic" systems. In the relevant literature, "Gnosticism" usually refers to an "anti-cosmic dualism" between the cosmos and a pre-cosmic world. The creation of the cosmos was due to an error, a mistake that was not meant to happen. The pre-cosmic world of light was a perfect, homogenous unity and oneness that did not "contain" distinctions. Cosmic history begins with a tragic, "first" distinction, a fall from unity and oneness, which, in a chain of events, ends with the coming-into-being of the cosmos. Human existence is cosmic existence but humans carry within themselves a divine spark, a spark of the divine light from the pre-cosmic world, and it is this spark that links them to the divine, pre-cosmic oneness. Indeed, humans become the conspirators in the divine plan to overcome the cosmos and to restore the original perfect unity.

Living in the cosmos, however, the humans are seduced by its powers. They "forget" that their existence in the cosmos is an "alienated existence." With their divine spark, they do not belong to the cosmos; they are, in a sense, "beyond" the cosmos. But forgetting, ignorance

and lack of knowledge are what chains them to the powers and laws of cosmic existence. They have been seduced to accept the inviolate levels of the world as they find them. They do not understand that they—as members of the world of light—are beyond the manifold distinctions prevailing in the cosmos. Accordingly, it is knowledge (*gnosis*) that liberates them. The secret saving knowledge of their true origins awakens humans from their state of ignorance, reveals the cosmic inviolate levels as arbitrary, and reminds humans that they have to overcome the cosmos and return to the pre-cosmic oneness. The saving knowledge consists, therefore, of a narrative which explains to the listener “who we were and what we have become, where we were and into what we have been thrown, whither we hasten and from what we are redeemed, what is birth and what is rebirth” (from Theodotus, a disciple of Valentinus – see Jonas 1964, 108 for an interpretation).

Gnostic myth tells the story of the negation of a negation. The cosmos was a negation; its overcoming will be a second negation. The cosmos is the result of a “wounding” of an original oneness. Once the arbitrariness of this and subsequent distinctions is revealed, the Gnostic understands that the structures of the cosmos are based on deception and ignorance; he or she can no longer accept its inviolate levels as structures *sui generis*. Still, the myth will then have to explain how these inviolate levels, in spite of their arbitrariness, have somehow come into being. Because it does not accept anything as given, the myth must explain everything. It is therefore presented in the literary form of a system—a “universal” system with an answer to everything. This system has to be self-referential because it includes the moment of salvation. It tells the story of how an unwanted and unintended accident created the cosmos, how the humans became conspirators in a divine plan to overcome the cosmos, how they were seduced and entered a state of sleep-like ignorance, how they were awakened by the myth, and how they were thereby inspired to return “home.” The myth occurs in its own contents; it not only tells the story of a turning point but it implements it. The myth is both recital and effectuation of salvation—a paradigmatic case of “re-entry.”

“Gnostic” myth could be “implemented” in a variety of ways. Some groups believed that the return to the divine oneness could take

place only after death. Accordingly, secret verses were whispered to the dying, which the latter were asked to recite on their ascent after death so that they could finally bypass the cosmic powers. Other groups believed that ascesis was the appropriate way of leaving the cosmos while one was still inhabiting it. Still others believed it was possible to approach oneness through meditation and contemplation. There are contacts, therefore, also to Neo-Platonic systems, in which the various gradations of being result from “emanation” proceeding from the One.

The similarities to Luhmann's theory design are obvious. The Gnostic dualism problematizes the cosmos in its entirety, and Luhmann's vision is no less radical than this. Luhmann was tired of 2000 years of searching for essence, and he drew, for us, the final conclusion: there is none. Hence, everything that is considered “normal,” everything that is taken for granted, has to be considered “unlikely.” The “normal,” “self-evident” grounds of everyday existence have to be dissolved and their unlikelihood and contingency exposed, so that it then needs to be explained how what has been revealed as contingent could ever have ossified into a “normality,” into an inviolate level (Luhmann 1981, 11). For the one who observes reality through such lenses, it is impossible to become attached to whatever poses as “normality.” In his retirement lecture at Bielefeld University, Luhmann asked himself whether there was anything “behind” or “beneath” his theory. The last two words of the lecture provided the answer: *Gar nichts!*—Nothing!—and the exclamation mark, which is in the original, is important (Luhmann 1993a, 259). There is a sense in which he is right in proclaiming that there is “nothing” behind his theory, but Luhmann's mystic vision implicitly hypostatizes this “nothing” as a positive entity, as the “world,” the “unmarked space,” as a “Nothing!”

Luhmann's rebellion against the inviolate levels of the cosmos—against the “deception” that hides the “true structure of the world”—does not call for action or change because action requires a purpose, a goal. But if paradise is lost, it is not clear what this goal should be. In the moment of action, the goal becomes another inviolate level—another deception. Accordingly, Luhmann proclaimed: “No 11th thesis any more!”—and again, the exclamation mark is telling (Luhmann

1993a, 249). And, as noted earlier, it is precisely here, in the absence of Marx's "11th thesis"—"The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it" (Marx 1974)—that Luhmann sees "an advance in rationality." The "11th thesis" is replaced by a contemplative *gnosis*, which provides us with the *libertas indifferentiae*, the freedom of indifference.

World Society

Of course, world society is not the same as the "world." In contrast to the world, world society has boundaries because it is, by definition, the totality of communication and hence does not include e.g. consciousness (Luhmann 1984a, 555). And yet, Luhmann's treatment of world society parallels his treatment of the "world." In his discussion of "society" and "world society" one can find the same intellectual gesture that, in his self-understanding, marked his departure from "ontological metaphysics": his re-interpretation of the functional method. Luhmann contemplated the unity of the world in the functional equivalence of all distinctions; all distinctions are woundings of the world. Similarly, all social systems including societies have to differentiate themselves from, and within, world society (Luhmann 1997, 163). Accordingly, all communication "implies world society" (Luhmann 1997, 150). In communication, world society is "carried along" in a manner analogous to the way in which, for autopoietic systems, the world is "carried along" as a horizon. In other words, one obtains "world society" by taking the cross-section of the "world" that consists of communication only. In Luhmann's construction, world society is a derivate of the world, and as such it shares the "mystical" features of the latter. In the first instance, his world society is a horizon and hence not a concrete phenomenon that could become the object or subject of political organization.

It is important to appreciate that this understanding of world society is not particularly original. In the history of mysticism it appears almost as a constant across a wide range of different mystical traditions. For example, Meister Eckhart's intuition of unity, when applied to humanity, gives rise to a world society not unlike Luhmann's. As

Ernst Otto explained, "in space and time I behold this man beside that man. Without space and time this is that and that is this. In the mystical vision stands man, the one, the whole, all mankind undivided and joined together in him" (Otto 1987, 67). Unfortunately, it is precisely when he tries to go beyond this understanding of world society as a horizon that Luhmann's analysis runs into serious problems. For the horizon, for Luhmann, must also be a "system."

From early on Luhmann felt that sociology, in order to acquire an identity as a "proper" academic discipline, required a general theory of society as the all-encompassing social entity. Once he had embraced the notion of the "system," it became clear that this general theory would have to present society as a "system" (Luhmann 1968a, 15-24). From then on, Luhmann's efforts were largely driven by the need to find a definition of "system" that would do the job. And he adopted the idea of "autopoiesis" precisely because he believed that it could fill this gap in his work. This move, however, posed problems of its own. Luhmann's definition of society as the totality of communication, as noted above, assigned to society the role of a horizon. But it did not draw on the notion of "autopoiesis" at all. Thus, Luhmann needed to provide an additional argument that would show that this society, the totality of communication, was indeed a system, i.e. an autopoietic system.

What is Luhmann's argument? In *Soziale Systeme*, Luhmann explained that society was the autopoietic system "par excellence" because society "generated" communication and communication "generated" society. In other words, society constituted the elements it consisted of (i.e. communication) and whatever was constituted in this way became society (Luhmann 1984a, 555). The problem with this argument is that it has nothing to do with "autopoiesis." Instead, it merely exploits the logical properties of a "totality." One could use the same argument to show that the set of all cats and dogs forms an autopoietic system. The totality of all cats and dogs produces more cats and dogs and these cats and dogs become moments in the totality of all cats and dogs. The argument, in fact, works for all "totalities" X, but the question of whether X is an autopoietic system is a very different question. Note, for example, that the "totality of all cats and dogs" is *not* an autopoietic system. Thus, in order to substantiate the

thesis that the totality of communication is a system, Luhmann would need an additional principle that guarantees connectivity beyond the common membership in one species or category (in this case: communication). There is a sense in Luhmann, of course, that communication induces more communication but to say that the totality of communication is an autopoietic system means that every communication must be “connected,” possibly via a sequence or “chain” of intermediate communications, with every other communication.

Luhmann’s vision of world society is breathtaking. It assumes that in spite of differences in language and culture, there is continuity and uniformity beneath the mumbles and stumbles produced daily all over the globe. Such a vision is particularly problematic for a theory that claims to begin theorizing with difference and with distinctions rather than with identity. Moreover, Luhmann’s “argument” in *Soziale Systeme* is not an argument at all; it is a claim based on flawed reasoning. It is bizarre that a thinker as sharp as Luhmann remained unaware of this problem; in fact, 13 years after *Soziale Systeme*, the late *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* simply repeats the same error of reasoning (Luhmann 1997, 90-91).

Whenever Luhmann comes close to discovering this gap in his theory, he usually leaves us with “obvious” empirical observations. At one point he reflected on the possibility that there could be more than just one society. In this case, there would be more than one totality of communication, meaning these societies would not know of any communication in their respective environments. In other words, for each of these societies, the existence of other societies would be without consequences (Luhmann 1997, 78). For the purpose of theory building, this possibility can therefore be neglected. In any case, he added, the fact of one and only one world society was simply the result of historical developments, most importantly of the full discovery of the earth as a compact sphere (Luhmann 1971b; Luhmann 1973, 82; Luhmann 1975, 97; Luhmann 1982b, Luhmann 1997, 148). The case for world society, according to Luhmann, was hence empirically well supported and “obvious” (Luhmann 1997, 170, Luhmann 2000, 220).

Interestingly, in the late 1960s, before Luhmann adopted the notion of “autopoiesis,” he briefly contemplated the possibility that society, as the all-encompassing social entity, could not be described as a

“system.” In this case, he continued, society would simply be “a non-exclusive structure, which enables communication and interprets the world” (Luhmann 1968a, 17). In the end, Luhmann rejected this possibility because it would eject “society” from sociology’s subject matter. In other words, the idea was rejected not because it was true or false—Luhmann does not engage in an argument of this kind—but because it would be in conflict with sociology’s purpose.

Luhmann’s manoeuvres are revealing. The “argument” concerning the possible co-existence of several “exclusive” societies is interesting but again merely exploits the logical properties of “totalities.” In other words, this “argument” too has nothing to do with “autopoiesis.” The fact that he “sensed” that “horizons” cannot be “systems” is hardly reassuring considering that his concern for his discipline—sociology—overrode common sense. The empirical observations, finally, are there for us to believe or reject; but they certainly are not substitutes for a theory of society.

Niklas Luhmann’s conception of world society is largely motivated by conflicting assumptions which are intrinsic to his “vision” and to the discipline to which he intended to contribute (sociology). Because the tension between these assumptions—the “horizon” vs. the “system”—cannot be resolved, it is difficult to characterize Luhmann’s approach as a “theory.” The mystical element of his thinking about society appears to us to be more coherent than the sociological element. To the extent, therefore, that his world society is a derivative of his “vision,” I may characterize his discussion of world society as an “evocation,” a “calling forth” of an entity whose reality remains mysterious.

Conclusion

At the centre of Luhmann’s “vision” stands a very specific and idiosyncratic appreciation of the historical role of science as the force that reveals the truth of the groundlessness of the world. It is impossible to over-emphasize the importance that Luhmann assigns to the impact of science on society. In the past, he explained, the history of the self-reflection of European society tended to be a history of the hypostati-

sations of functional primacies. For example, as long as “religion” was the dominant subsystem of society, society was interpreted in “religious” terms. For Marx, in contrast, economics was the dominant subsystem and hence societal self-reflection was conducted in economic terms. The hypostatisation of functional primacies came to an end, however, with the arrival of modern science. Science was “reflective”; science would be able to appreciate that it was only one functional subsystem among many and hence would not hypostatise itself. In fact, science could not impose a ground onto what it knew to be a groundless world (Luhmann 1979, 222).

The epochal significance of science leads us back from Luhmann’s late 20th century to the 17th century, the time when modern science took hold in the European mind. The rise of science signified an attempt to re-establish the foundations of knowledge in a period of history in which the horrors of religious warfare provided visible evidence in support of the sceptics, who questioned the possibility of both moral knowledge and knowledge derived from sense experience. Descartes was among those who accepted the challenge of the sceptics. Searching for “rock and clay” beneath the “loose earth and sand” of his contemporary intellectual climate, he discovered the *Cogito Ergo Sum* as the foundation which even the most radical sceptics could not undermine. Luhmann recognized Descartes as one of his predecessors. What Descartes discovered was the mind’s autopoiesis, i.e. the mind’s ability to find certainty in the facticity of its own operation. Luhmann, according to his self-understanding, offered a radicalization and generalization of the Cartesian gesture. In Luhmann’s framework, self-reference is no longer the privilege of the mind or the subject but it becomes the general principles of system differentiation (Luhmann 1973, 72). As a result, he finds his “rock and clay” in the inevitability of “blind spots,” which he considers to be “evident beyond deduction and causality” (Luhmann 1986b, 130-131). Of course, this radicalization is also partly a reversal. Where Descartes conceived of science as a response to the sceptics, Luhmann knew science as scepticism’s ultimate manifestation.

The full meaning of these analogies becomes apparent once it is understood that the real significance of “self-reference” goes beyond

epistemological concerns. Again, the comparison with the 16th and 17th centuries is instructive. Historically, “self-reference” becomes important in the aftermath of periods of prolonged ideological conflict. For neo-Stoic writers like Justus Lipsius, it was a commonplace that during a “peace more brutal than war” the wise man would think of his own survival first. When people killed in the name of truth, it was always better to suspend judgment and to remember the contingency of one’s own opinions so that one could not be taken at one’s word. In dark times such as these, the only certitude one could rely on was the one that one created for oneself. In other words, the ground upon which you stood in a groundless world had to be your own creation. Born in 1927, Luhmann experienced both the Second World War and the Cold War, and his “theory” articulates the loss of orientation that is the lasting effect of a period of ideological conflict. Luhmann’s “theory” appeals to his readers today to the extent that they share this loss of orientation.

Works Cited

- Fuchs, Peter. 1992. Von der Beobachtung des Unbeobachtbaren: Ist Mystik ein Fall von Inkommunikabilität? In Niklas Luhmann and Peter Fuchs, *Reden und Schweigen*, 70-100. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- Ghose, Amitabha. 1980. Cybernetics of Second Order—Some Problems. In *Autopoiesis, communication, and society—The theory of autopoietic systems in the social sciences*, edited by Frank Benseler, Peter M. Hejl, Wolfgang K. Koeck, 197-206. Frankfurt/M.: Campus.
- Habermas, Jürgen and Niklas Luhmann. 1971. *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie—Was leistet die Systemforschung?* Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- Jonas, Hans. 1964. *Gnosis und Spätantiker Geist—Erster Teil: Die mythologische Gnosis*. 3rd edition. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht.
- _____. 1966. *Gnosis und Spätantiker Geist—Zweiter Teil: Von der Mythologie zur mystischen Philosophie*. 2nd edition. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht.
- Luhmann, Niklas. 1958. Der Funktionenbegriff in der Verwaltungswissenschaft. *Verwaltungsarchiv* 49 (2): 97-105.

- _____. 1962 [1974]. Funktion und Kausalität. In Niklas Luhmann, *Soziologische Aufklärung 1: Aufsätze zur Theorie sozialer Systeme*. 4th edition, 9-30. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- _____. 1964a [1976]. *Funktionen und Folgen formaler Organisation*. 3rd edition. Berlin: Duncker and Humblot.
- _____. 1964b [1974]. Funktionale Methode und Systemtheorie. In Niklas Luhmann, *Soziologische Aufklärung 1: Aufsätze zur Theorie sozialer Systeme*. 4th edition, 31-53. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- _____. 1967a [1974]. Soziologische Aufklärung. In Niklas Luhmann, *Soziologische Aufklärung 1: Aufsätze zur Theorie sozialer Systeme*. 4th edition, 66-91. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- _____. 1967b [1974]. Soziologie als Theorie sozialer Systeme. In Niklas Luhmann, *Soziologische Aufklärung 1: Aufsätze zur Theorie sozialer Systeme*. 4th edition, 113-136. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- _____. 1968a [1971]. Moderne Systemtheorien als Form gesamtgesellschaftlicher Analyse. In Jürgen Habermas and Niklas Luhmann, 7-24, *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie—Was leistet die Systemforschung?* Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- _____. 1968b [1973]. 3rd edition. *Vertrauen*. Stuttgart: Enke.
- _____. 1971a. Sinn als Grundbegriff der Soziologie. In Jürgen Habermas and Niklas Luhmann, 25-100, *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie—Was leistet die Systemforschung?* Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- _____. 1971b [1982]. Die Weltgesellschaft. In Niklas Luhmann, *Soziologische Aufklärung 2: Aufsätze zur Theorie der Gesellschaft*. 2nd edition, 51-71. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- _____. 1973 [1982]. Selbst-Thematisierungen des Gesellschaftssystems. In Niklas Luhmann, *Soziologische Aufklärung 2: Aufsätze zur Theorie der Gesellschaft*. 2nd edition, 72-102. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- _____. 1975. *Macht*. Stuttgart: Enke.
- _____. 1979 [1981]. Identitätsgebrauch in selbstsubstitutiven Ordnungen, insbesondere Gesellschaften. In Niklas Luhmann, 198-227, *Soziologische Aufklärung 3: Soziales System, Gesellschaft, Organisation*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- _____. 1981. Vorbemerkungen zu einer Theorie sozialer Systeme. In Niklas Luhmann, 11-24, *Soziologische Aufklärung 3: Soziales System, Gesellschaft, Organisation*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.

- _____. 1982a. Autopoiesis, Handlung und kommunikative Verständigung. *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 11 (4): 366-379.
- _____. 1982b. The world society as a social system. *International Journal of General Systems* 8: 131-138.
- _____. 1984a. *Soziale Systeme*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- _____. 1984b. The self-description of society: Crisis fashion and sociological theory. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 25 (1-2): 59-72.
- _____. 1986a. The autopoiesis of social systems. In *Sociocybernetic paradoxes: Observation, control and evolution of self-steering systems*, edited by Felix Geyer and Johannes van der Zouwen, 172-192. London: Beverly Hills.
- _____. 1986b. The theory of social systems and its epistemology: A reply to Danilo Zolo's critical comments. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 16: 129-134.
- _____. 1987a. Die Unterscheidung Gottes. In Niklas Luhmann, 236-253, *Soziologische Aufklärung 4: Beiträge zur funktionalen Differenzierung der Gesellschaft*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- _____. 1987b. Ich nehme mal Karl Marx. Gespräch mit Walter van Rossum. In *Archimedes und Wir*, edited by Dirk Baecker, Georg Stanitzek, 14-37. Berlin: Merve.
- _____. 1987c. Biographie, Attitüden, Zettelkasten. *Niklas Luhmann: Archimedes und Wir*, edited by Dirk Baecker, Georg Stanitzek, 125-155. Berlin: Merve: 125-155.
- _____. 1987d. Die Richtigkeit soziologischer Theorie. *Merkur* 41: 36-49.
- _____. 1988a. *Die Wirtschaft der Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- _____. 1988b. Neuere Entwicklungen in der Systemtheorie. *Merkur* 42: 292-300.
- _____. 1989a. Die Ausdifferenzierung der Religion. In Niklas Luhmann, 259-357, *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik: Studien zur Wissenssoziologie der modernen Gesellschaft Band 3*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- _____. 1989b. *Theorie der Gesellschaft ('San Foca Fassung')*. Manuscript: 388pp.
- _____. 1990a. *Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- _____. 1990b [1992]. Sthenographie. In Niklas Luhmann et al., *Beobachter-Konvergenz der Erkenntnistheorien?* 2nd edition, 119-137. München: Fink.

- _____. 1990c. Das Erkenntnisprogramm des Konstruktivismus und die unbekannt bleibende Realität. In Niklas Luhmann, 31-58, *Soziologische Aufklärung 5: Konstruktivistische Perspektiven*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- _____. 1991. "Ich denke primär historisch"—Religionssoziologische Perspektiven. Ein Gespräch mit Fragen von Detlef Pollack. *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 39 (9): 937-956.
- _____. 1992a. Stellungnahme. In *Kritik der Theorie sozialer Systeme – Auseinandersetzung mit Luhmanns Hauptwerk*, edited by W. Krawietz and M. Welker, 371-386. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- _____. 1992b. *Beobachtungen der Moderne*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- _____. 1992c. Die Selbstbeobachtung des Systems: Ein Gespräch mit dem Soziologen Niklas Luhmann. Interview with questions from Ingeborg Breuer. *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 5 December 1992: ZB2.
- _____. 1993a. "Was ist der Fall?" und "Was steckt dahinter?"—Die zwei Soziologien and die Gesellschaftstheorie. *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 22 (4): 245-260.
- _____. 1993b. Observing re-entries. *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 16 (2): 485-498.
- _____. 1995. *Social systems*. Translated by John Bednarz Jr. Stanford: Stanford University Press
- _____. 1997. *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- _____. 2000. *Die Politik der Gesellschaft*. Edited by André Kieserling. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- Marx, Karl. 1974. Theses on Feuerbach. In *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: The German ideology*, edited by C. J. Arthur. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Miller, C. L. 1984. Nicholas of Cusa's "The vision of God." In *An introduction to the medieval mystics of Europe*, edited by P. E. Szarmach, 293-312. Albany: SUNY Press.
- O'Regan, Cyral. 2002. *Gnostic apocalypse: Jacob Boehme's haunted narrative*. New York: SUNY Press.
- Otto, Ernst. 1987. *Mysticism east and west*. Wheaton: Quest.

- Reese-Schäfer, Walter. 1992. *Luhmann zur Einführung*. Hamburg: Junius.
- Von Foerster, Heinz. 1984. *Observing systems*. 2nd edition. Seaside, CA: Inter-systems Publications.
- Weeks, Andrew. 1991. *Boehme: An intellectual biography of the 17th century philosopher and mystic*. New York: SUNY Press.