

Is Communication Emerging or *Sui Generis*?

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Upshot • Füllsack (2012) studies the communication network system as emergent, but the human actor can also be considered as an effect of the communication of meaning. Human reflexivity provides a necessary condition for interhuman communication, and *vice versa* (Luhmann 2002). Füllsack's paper raises the question of whether society is emerging or *sui generis* (cf. Füllsack 2009)? This contribution discusses the latter (perhaps counter-intuitive) perspective and some analytical consequences.

1. "Whereas Freud, from a biological starting point, arrived at the recognition of the distinctive properties of social systems, Durkheim began with the conviction that clear distinctions between social and personal systems were essential; in his famous phrase, society was a reality *sui generis*?" (Parsons 1968: 432). Parsons (1952; 1964:18) analyzed that sociology finds its origins in the convergence of Durkheim's insight that "the individual, as a member of society, is not wholly free to make his own decisions but is in some sense 'constrained' to accept the orientations common to the society of which he is a member" with "Freud's discovery of the internalization of moral values as an essential part of the structure of the personality." Parsons' crucial innovation, in my opinion, was then to reverse the arrow in the traditional problem of how social order is maintained (cf. Hobbes), that is, the integration of action into social structure: action is not integrated into social structure, but social structure is integrated into each action. If structure is always integrated into action, however, there is no environment left, and therefore no systematic position for feedback by action(s) over time can be defined.

2. Luhmann (1977: 65; 1978) argued that Parsons' theory can consequently be seen as the most systematic attempt to understand the relation between the individual and society as one which is *internal* to the system. Luhmann (1984) proposed to reformulate the relation between the individual and society in terms of two types of systems which operate in each other's environments, and over time. Society is then considered as a communication system among individuals minds (Luhmann 2002). The two systems are analytically independent, but they interact in events that can then be labeled "actions" with reference to actors, and "communications" with reference to the network. This model provides us with an opportunity to operationalize the external cybernetic relations. In addition to relations between actors and the network, one has to specify how the network can obtain (and maintain) a complex structure.

3. How is information generated in a communication system? When does a communication network develop according to its own logic? How can one follow Luhmann when he argues that the communication system is not only operationally closed, but even self-organizing (“autopoietic”), analogously to the self-organizing character of biological and psychological systems (Maturana and Varela 1980)? The usual way to argue for the social system as *sui generis* has been by using the argument of “double contingency” in interactions (Parsons and Shils 1951: 3-39; Parsons 1968; and Luhmann 1984: 148 ff.). Füllsack (2012) follows this model and extends it to multiple contingencies among agents (§§ 8 ff.). However, the “double contingency” of Ego and Alter for each other is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for the existence of a communication system: the “double contingency” has consequences for the awareness and behaviour of the actors involved, but it does not have to imply “communication” as part of an operationally closed and different system that could then also be considered as an external source.

4. One can argue for the existence of the network as a distinct system by using Shannon’s (1948) mathematical theory of communication: the expected information content of the system is equal to the uncertainty within this system. As long as an actor processes on its own, it—that is, the actor as a system—can only attribute its uncertainty to itself. However, as soon as two actors communicate, neither of them can internally generate the information necessary to exclude the possibility that uncertainty has originated from (noise in) the communication. The uncertainty can be attributed to each of them *or* to the communication. Therefore, one has to assume that the communication system itself is able to generate uncertainty by operating (Leydesdorff 1993: 58f.).

5. The advantage of the specification of the communication system as operationally independent, in comparison with the argument from the double contingency of relations among actors, is that it defines the communication system as based in uncertainty which cannot be reduced to the awareness and perceptions of the actors involved. In my opinion, “double contingency” should be discussed in the context of the selectivity of communication. However, if there were no a priori possibility to communicate in the social system there would be no possibility for Ego to distinguish between Alter and anything else in its environment. Since the part of the uncertainty generated in communication originates independently from the intentions of the actors involved, one has to specify how it can be generated by the communication system, that is, autopoietically.

6. In common-sense language, one is accustomed to thinking of actors and networks as intrinsically related: networks operate because actors act within them, and actors operate through networks. This language may be adequate to describe social reality at face-value; but in terms of an explanatory model, a description of what actually happened as an outcome in social reality informs us only about the (dependent) results which are to be explained in terms of the underlying processes. If one is additionally allowed to assume that the network networks, and the

actor acts, one may be able to specify the conditions under which actors network, and the networks act, i.e., instances of which one was able to give only a description *ex post* in common-sense language. However, in order to do so, one has to give a meaning to the non-common-sensical expression that “the network networks.”

7. The communication network system can also be studied as emergent (Füllsack 2012). This remains a partial perspective because communication is analytically a system *sui generis* (Füllsack 2009: 73f.; Leydesdorff 2002: 131f.). In my opinion, the human mind differs from biological agents because of emerging within the communication of meaning as a necessary condition of this (interhuman) communication (Leydesdorff 2012; Luhmann 2002).

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