



**ANTHROPOLOGY  
of the CONTEMPORARY  
RESEARCH  
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**WHAT FIRST-ORDER  
OBSERVERS CAN LEARN  
FROM SECOND-ORDER  
OBSERVATIONS**

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**Nicolas Langlitz**

**WHAT FIRST-ORDER OBSERVERS CAN LEARN  
FROM SECOND-ORDER OBSERVATIONS**

Observing other observers observing is common practice. We become particularly aware of the way in which others see things when it differs from our own perspective. When observing another observer observing we are less interested in *what* she observes than in *how* she observes her object. The German sociologist Niklas Luhmann distinguished these two modes of observation referring to the former as first-order and to the latter as second-order observations. Social scientists—like everybody else—practice both kinds of observations. Describing the structure of a kinship system or the demography of a certain population can serve as examples of first-order observations. Here, the kinship system or the population is the focus of the observer's attention. In other research projects such as opinions polls or anthropological studies of belief systems the social scientific observer is more interested in the perspectives of the people holding those views than in the referents of their opinions and beliefs. It has become more common for certain institutions, in which first-order observation used to be prevalent (life sciences research facilities, biotech companies, policy-making institutions, etc.) to integrate—more or less experimentally—social scientific second-order observers. Therefore, the question I would like to discuss here is in which respect first-order observers who are mostly interested in what is the case (often in order to change it) can profit from second-order observations.

A promising place to begin looking for an answer to this question seems to be Luhmann's own engagement as a policy adviser. In the 1950s and 1960s, the West German administrative authorities were in the process of adjustment and stabilization after the breakdown of the Third Reich's administration in 1945. For this purpose, a number of comprehensive surveys were commissioned. Despite the abundance of information produced these surveys lacked direction and hardly considered any scientific expertise. In response to this, the German government began pushing for a fundamental reform of the administrative apparatus from 1968 onward (a project, which was soon regarded as a failure and consequently closed down in 1975).<sup>1</sup> Things administrative were close to Niklas Luhmann's heart. In the 1950s, before entering academia as a sociologist, he worked as a lawyer at the

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<sup>1</sup> Kurt Jeserich, Hans Pohl, and Georg-Christoph von Unruh, *Deutsche Verwaltungsgeschichte*, vol. 5 (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1987), 1096-1100.

administrative court [*Oberverwaltungsgericht*] Lüneburg organizing a database of court decisions and in the ministry of education and cultural affairs of the federal state Niedersachsen, where he processed restitution payments to victims of the Nazi regime. Hence, it comes as no surprise that from his first publication in 1958 onward, Luhmann was preoccupied with problems of administration.<sup>2</sup> When intervening in the debate over the reform of the German civil service, the role Luhmann played resembled that of Michel Foucault's "specific" intellectual familiar with the technicalities of a particular domain.<sup>3</sup> In the context of the reformatory efforts of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Luhmann was on a commission in Bonn working on the restructuring of the civil service and published a number of articles on this subject matter.

In one of these texts, *Reform und Information. Theoretische Überlegungen zur Reform der Verwaltung*, first printed in the journal *Die Verwaltung* in 1970, Luhmann explained how his perspective differed from that of the politician or civil servant dealing with an administrative reform.

In the eyes of the politician and the administrative practitioner the administrative reform appears to be a good, but somewhat hopeless thing, a comprehensive and therefore only gradually realizable project. In this context, he mostly thinks about reorganizing territorial boundaries, merging different departments, cutting down on staff, speeding up decision-making processes or the flow of communication, simplifying regulations or forms—in short: about more or less complex projects, which basically resemble other difficult tasks. Such projects require a lot of information, which is associated with the unpleasant experience that the files are growing bigger and bigger. Eventually, no one has time anymore to read them. You need a special assessor for this, a planning committee, an executive team—and still have to find a way from time to time to finish off the reform as unfinished in order to allow of a new beginning.<sup>4</sup>

In Luhmann's eyes, the core problem here is the role of information. To break up the vicious circle of the perpetual accumulation of information and the failure of reforms he suggests taking a new look by reverting the perspective:

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<sup>2</sup> Niklas Luhmann, "Der Funktionsbegriff in der Verwaltungswissenschaft," *Verwaltungsarchiv* 49 (1958).

<sup>3</sup> Otherwise, the broad range of areas Luhmann subjected to his version of systems theory (from science to religion and from art to bureaucracy) is less suggestive of the figure of the "specific" intellectual. However, Luhmann was not a "universal" intellectual in Foucault's sense either: His "soziologische Aufklärung" does not aim at counterposing "to power, despotism, and the abuses and arrogance of wealth the universality of justice" and reason. Instead its goal is an expansion of a system's capacity for observation and, consequently, to register and reduce complexity. Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Power. Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, ed. James Faubion (New York: The New Press, 2000), 128. Niklas Luhmann, "Soziologische Aufklärung," in *Soziologische Aufklärung. Aufsätze zur Theorie sozialer Systeme* (Köln-Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1974).

<sup>4</sup> Niklas Luhmann, "Reform und Information: Theoretische Überlegungen zur Reform der Verwaltung," in *Politische Planung. Aufsätze zur Soziologie von Politik und Verwaltung* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1971), 181. All following translations of quotations from German sources by Nicolas Langlitz.

Obviously, there is a close connection between reform and information. But if it is the case that information poses such a problem for reform and causes its continuous failure, it suggests itself to think first of all about a reform of information. Such a reversal of the means to the object of reform leads away from an immediately practical orientation to rather difficult theoretical questions.<sup>5</sup>

Instead of following the practitioners' demand for just another reform of the administrative system, Luhmann proposes to think about the problem of administrative reforms in a more abstract and systematic manner. What is needed is a reform of the administrative system's capacity for reforms. To accomplish such a reform of the reform the system needs to gain flexibility by processing information differently.

Let me briefly sum up Luhmann's argument. Luhmann defines an administration as a social system of organized action, which is characterized by the fact that its decisions are binding upon their addressees. As a system it serves to reduce an overly complex world to a limited number of decidable alternatives.<sup>6</sup> The function of an administrative system is to decide in certain cases on certain alternatives. Its decision-making is guided by its structure. A structure is defined as a complex of decision-making premises neutralizing all possibilities but a few. This restriction relieves the administrator who only has to decide on the remaining options. Luhmann distinguishes three types of decision-making premises in an administrative system: the organization regulating the social cooperation required by the decision-making process, the decision-making program determining the criteria on which decisions on specific cases have to be made, and the personality structures of the decision-makers, which have been formed by their training and socialization. In the actual process of decision-making these premises can be taken for granted—they cannot and do not have to be decided upon themselves.<sup>7</sup> However, unlike the administrator looking at a certain case that needs to be decided according to this unquestioned set of premises an observer of the decision-making process can instead focus on those premises.

Structures [i.e., complexes of decision-making premises] are primarily developed from the perspective of their users, who are relieved by them and therefore cannot freely dispose of them. For the observer of this process, on the other hand, its functionality becomes apparent raising the question of different possibilities of structural formation.<sup>8</sup>

Such an observer is what Luhmann would later on refer to as a second-order observer. Of course, here, Luhmann himself serves as a second-order observer analyzing the conditions of

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 187-189.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 187.

the administrative decision-making process. A structural reform of this process requires second-order observations problematizing the decision-making premises. They are called into question and need to be decided upon. Hence, a reform aims at decisions on decisions.

Traditionally, Luhmann notes, such decisions on decisions were the object of “structural planning.” The problem he diagnoses is that administrative systems are too complex and the future too unpredictable for goal-oriented [*zweckrational*] planning that anticipates a certain final state.<sup>9</sup> As a result, structural reforms imposed from outside of the system often turn out to be inefficient. What is needed instead, Luhmann suggests, is a self-reflexive decision-making process within the administrative system that is capable of modifying itself in response to unforeseen challenges. Here, we get back to Luhmann’s problematization of the relationship between reform and information. According to Luhmann, an event has an informational value if it is unexpected. Its surprising particularities become visible because the event does not match the observer’s expectations.<sup>10</sup> In the case of an administrative system, such expectations are incorporated in the decision-making premises. In order to be processed, a case needs to fit into a limited number of preconceived categories. Information must be normalized. A reform of the administrative system’s capacity for reforms would have to establish a mechanism that allows the system to alter the way in which it processes information in response to genuinely new information instead of simply normalizing it. In Luhmann’s words:

Normally, structures are supposed to normalize information, to adjust the unknown to the known, the new to the old. They serve the ascertainment of the uncertain. Overall administrations work the same way when they transform information into meaningful data through interaction with their environment: accepting a petition, asking questions, putting down impressions, recording evidence, having forms filled out—not sticking after all to selection processes, but to the data. Only in systems of a relatively high degree of complexity it becomes possible to not simply deal with the information, but to look at it as a structural problem, as a critique of the structure, and as a possible reason to change it, to treat the relationship between structure and information as a question, which allows of two responses. Then information can also be interpreted as an indicator of an insufficient adjustment of the system’s structure to the system’s environment providing an occasion for innovation. Only when this possibility has been created in administrative systems, structural reform and administrative reform can gain independence from the “accidental” nature of political situations and impulses and become a matter of administration itself.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 184-186. Niklas Luhmann, "Reform des öffentlichen Dienstes. Zum Problem ihrer Probleme," in *Politische Planung. Aufsätze zur Soziologie von Politik und Verwaltung* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1971), 209.

<sup>10</sup> Luhmann, "Reform und Information," 184.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 190.

In a second text, *Reform des öffentlichen Dienstes. Zum Problem ihrer Probleme*, Luhmann elaborates a specific aspect of this proposal, which was also the focus of his work in Bonn. While an administration's organization and program can be adjusted to new demands rather quickly, its least flexible component is its personnel.

Personnel policy is most pressing insofar as it has long-term effects and requires hardly reversible decisions. In a quickly and incalculably changing society, this consideration of a broad horizon of planning and effect should be of particular importance. We do not know which programs the public administration has to carry out in the next decade, to which extent, for example, it will have to deal with the direction of processes of scientific and technological developments, of economic planning, of structural policy for all important social subsystems. We do not know which forms of organization will then have to be chosen. Neither programmatic [??] nor organizational politics can be planned ahead for a decade. Such decisions must and can be taken subsequently according to the requirements. However, the staff planning and executing them has to be trained now. [...] Omissions on this level will have lasting consequences and can only be corrected in the rhythm of the change of generations.<sup>12</sup>

A reform of the personnel policy of the administration needs to be based on observations of its staff. But from the antihumanist perspective of Luhmann's systems theory, the personnel of the civil service is "not looked at in its whole concrete humaneness [*Menschlichkeit*], its needs, hopes, suffering, and individual life stories, but only as a complex of *structuring decision-making premises*."<sup>13</sup> Luhmann's second-order observation does not focus on the first-order observations of individuals, but on the observations made by a *system*, which are shaped by its structure. This "functional abstraction" allows to subdivide the circumstances associated with persons into various factors such as socialization, training, recruitment, or distribution of personnel within the system. Each of these factors is discussed in some detail regarding its impact on the decision-making process of the system. The concrete conclusions Luhmann's draws from his functional abstraction are characterized by two things: First, at the center of his concern is the functionality of the system, not the individual lives of those working in the system. Secondly, despite the normative implications of this perspective (the system is more important than the individual and the more flexible a system is the better) Luhmann's suggestions for reforms are antinormative insofar as they do not advocate a particular course of action as the only solution to a given problem. On the contrary, in Luhmann's eyes, a problem by definition allows of several different responses. When asked in an interview how he could make suggestions for political reforms without a normative orientation, Luhmann answers:

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<sup>12</sup> Luhmann, "Reform des öffentlichen Dienstes," 209.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

Let me answer this on the basis of an example concerning a conception of a reform of the civil service. At the origin of this proposal were defects in the existing structure of the administrative apparatus. While I was working in the ministry [of education and cultural affairs] I observed that the promotion policy of an administration does not aim at most efficiently employing people during the most productive stages of their lives, i.e., between the age of 40 and 55, but at how to increase their pension entitlements. For instance, civil servants were promoted to the position of *Amtsrat* only to be retired shortly afterwards vacating the position for another promoted civil servant. Such a policy does not aim at optimal employment of human qualifications, but is marked by the idea of maintenance: Everybody should have the feeling of becoming *Amtsrat* one day. Another example: Here, it is not imaginable that civil servants—when it is required by the circumstances—get demoted and return to their original position under better conditions. Instead, if one has no use for them anymore they are put into a state of quasi-retirement on the same level. In America, this is completely different. There, promotion and demotion are normal and do not count as morally reprehensible. But such a suggestion, like the normalization of the up and down, was thwarted the rigidity of the administrative apparatus. In any case, my thought does not aim at declaring one model or the other to be absolutely right, but at thinking through different alternatives and their preconditions and consequences. This form of thought also determines my whole scientific program. The point of departure of my reflections is a consideration like the following: If one looked at a society in a certain way, then I'm interested in the consequences this would have.<sup>14</sup>

Presenting and reflecting premises, preconditions, and consequences of such alternative models is a practice closely related to what Max Weber called technical criticism [*technische Kritik*]. In his essay *Die "Objektivität" sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis* (1904), Weber assigned to science the clarification of the relationship between ends, means, and values. Because of the peculiar kind of antinormative normativity characteristic of science the scientist has to bracket her personal value judgments. As a scientist she cannot determine which ends are worth pursuing, but can only assess whether certain means are suitable to reach a certain end. The social sciences can also examine the underlying values motivating such an enterprise, the values violated by a particular course of action as well as the resulting conflicts.<sup>15</sup> However, from Luhmann's point of view, Weber grossly overestimated the motivational power of values.

It is out of the question that values were capable of selecting actions. For this purpose, they are much too abstract and furthermore, from the perspective of situations of actions [Handlungssituationen] always given in the form of a value conflict. Their function is only to ensure an orientation of action, which cannot be called into question, in communicative situations. [...] Values are the medium of an assumption

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<sup>14</sup> Niklas Luhmann, "Biographie, Attitüden, Zettelkasten," in *Archimedes und wir. Interviews*, ed. Dirk Baecker and Georg Stanitzek (Berlin: Merve Verlag, 1987), 150-151.

<sup>15</sup> Max Weber, "Die 'Objektivität' sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis," in *Max Weber. Schriften, 1894-1922*, ed. Dirk Kaesler (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 2002), 78-80. An additional task of technical criticism (which, in Weber's eyes, goes beyond the limits of any single scientific discipline, but belongs among the tasks of what he calls "social philosophy") is to offer insight into the broader context and significance [*Bedeutung*] of the goals strived for.

of commonality, which restricts what can be said and demanded without determining what should be done.<sup>16</sup>

Like Weber Luhmann studies a certain problem (an end to be reached) and the different contingent responses given to it (means). Foucault and, following him, Paul Rabinow have referred to such complexes of problems and responses as “problematizations.”<sup>17</sup> But, as opposed to Weber’s position, the point of view from which Luhmann looks at alternative models is not ethical, but functional. His method of functional analysis examines a problematization from a functional perspective. This abstraction allows him to compare the diverse responses, which would otherwise appear as incomparable singularities: With reference to a supposed function the different proposed or practiced solutions can be regarded as equivalent and consequently as contingent.<sup>18</sup> Such a functional orientation does not only take into account already recognized alternatives, but can also draw attention to previously ignored or “latent” possibilities. From the perspective of first-order observation, the exploration of latencies produces more knowledge about a certain object of inquiry. In contrast, a second-order observer can see “less and other things,” as Luhmann puts it, than the observed observer. While observing *how* the other observer observes he cannot see *what* the other can see. What he can see instead is the observed observer’s blind spot. He thematizes and calls into question the viewpoint, from which the other makes his observations (the distinction guiding his view). Thereby, the seemingly tight coupling of observation and reality is seen as looser.<sup>19</sup> What the first-order observer perceives as natural and necessary appears to the second-order observer to be artificial and contingent. Instead of claiming to know what ought to be striving for a corresponding utopia (a world without bureaucracy or class struggle, an ecologically innocent economic system, a population perfectly safe from biohazards, etc.), Luhmann employs second-order observations to bring to light latent responses to a problem, which are pre-established, but not actualized in a given situation.<sup>20</sup> This is the background of Luhmann’s reflection of the reform of the German administrative system in the 1970s.

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<sup>16</sup> Niklas Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1997), 341-343.

<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits: 1954-1988*, vol. 4 (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1994), 597-598. Paul Rabinow, *Anthropos Today. Reflections on Modern Equipment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 47.

<sup>18</sup> Niklas Luhmann, "Soziologische Aufklärung," in *Soziologische Aufklärung. Aufsätze zur Theorie sozialer Systeme* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1970), 75. Claudio Baraldi, Giancarlo Corsi, and Elena Esposito, *GLU. Glossar zu Niklas Luhmanns Theorie sozialer Systeme* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1997), 61-63.

<sup>19</sup> Niklas Luhmann, "Dekonstruktion als Beobachtung zweiter Ordnung," in *Niklas Luhmann. Aufsätze und Reden*, ed. Oliver Jahraus (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2001), 264.

<sup>20</sup> Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, 1118-1119. *My guess is that—in our vocabulary—these latent responses are rather virtual (in the Deleuzian sense) than possible, but that claim would have to be checked carefully.*

The problem of reform is only posed by existing systems. If one wants to tackle reform as structural planning, one has to call into question the structures, which serve as decision-making premises in an existing administrative system, with these problems in mind. One has to determine according to which structuring premises decisions are actually made and to recognize the frozen solutions of those problems and to think them through anew with the prospect of other, maybe better possibilities.<sup>21</sup>

In Luhmann's historical narrative, the switch from a hierarchical to a functional differentiation of society characterizing modernity has revealed more and more latencies and, hence, contingencies of this kind. The Enlightenment, he argues, was an effect (and not the cause) of this development. Luhmann distinguishes three forms of Enlightenment: The "first Enlightenment"—also called *Vernunftaufklärung*—originating in the 18<sup>th</sup> century is a rationalistic enterprise, which pretends to know what reason, justice, and man are and how they should be realized. Historically, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward, it was followed by a more skeptical Enlightenment project, which has given up the claim to timeless laws of reason and morality and aims at unmasking the true causes of particular social or psychological realities (*entlarvende Aufklärung*). Both forms of Enlightenment are based on first-order observations. Looking at the world they are confident of being capable of revealing what is the case. They counteract the growing awareness of contingency by providing universalistic accounts of rationality, morality, and anthropology, or by exposing a hidden reality behind the misleading appearances of human life. In opposition to these first-order viewpoints, Luhmann advocates the second-order perspective of a "sociological Enlightenment."<sup>22</sup> Instead of promoting a single account of nature or of the true reasons for a certain situation, Luhmann's sociological Enlightenment employs second-order observations to paint the world in an almost cubist manner. Reality now appears as refracted by a multitude of different perspectives. It can always also be seen from a different angle, which reveals different possibilities (and conceals others). This new style of Enlightenment requires a conception of latency that refers to latent functions, not causes. What is disclosed are alternative perspectives—including their inconsistencies—suggesting alternative, but not self-evident responses to a given problem. Thus sociological Enlightenment, at least initially, does not aim at neat explanations and simple solutions, but at complicating the picture and at increasing the consciousness and communication of contingencies<sup>23</sup>—which raises another problem. Sociological enlightenment

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<sup>21</sup> Luhmann, "Reform und Information," 194.

<sup>22</sup> Luhmann, "Soziologische Aufklärung." Niklas Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme. Grundriß einer allgemeinen Theorie* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1984), 465. Baraldi, Corsi, and Esposito, *GLU*, 178-180.

<sup>23</sup> Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme*, 468.

remains a skeptical critique of action as well, but it does not unmask the ideas of the actor as an artful illusory world, as a mere embellishment of base motives, but as an incomplete selection, as a far too drastic and rough simplification of a much more complicated social reality. The self-presentation of acting systems is not recklessly brought down anymore, but is made aware of its internal contradictions, of viewpoints playing a part, of other possibilities. Science does not suggest to the actor anymore to understand himself as the executant of a single shameful basic motive. On the contrary, it demands of him a much more complex view of action knowing full well that he is unable to achieve it. Not discrediting, but overtaxing now becomes the problem of Enlightenment.<sup>24</sup>

Luhmann is well aware of the fact that the demonstration of alternatives is not only liberating, but can also be experienced as a burden and a risk. The manifestation of a certain kind of latencies, which Luhmann calls structural-functional latencies, is risky insofar as their latency fulfills a particular function: the preservation of the system's present structure.<sup>25</sup> Of course, it might seem desirable to change this structure—as in the case of the German civil service. But the consequences of any destabilization need to be weighed carefully. Luhmann recommends not to change anything unless all functions of the present state can be substituted—a caution, which has earned him the label of the neoconservative.<sup>26</sup> Of course, this raises the question whether functions as such are really ahistorical or whether a particular function can or even has to be abandoned under certain circumstances. However, apart from the subversion of a functionally workable status quo, the proliferation of alternatives can also turn into a strain when considering all the different options becomes too time-consuming. Often time pressure does not allow to realize or even to adequately deliberate all possibilities. One response to the uncontrolled spread of choice and contingency is an unbalanced emphasis on action. Luhmann explains this phenomenon as follows:

On the one hand, Enlightenment means: manifestation of latent structures and functions, and on the other hand: functional comparison. Both schemes work hand in hand. But they contradict each other if functional analysis discovers the function of latencies. At this point, society informs itself that it may not know that it may not know what it may not know. The function of latency requires the latency of function. The way out of this dilemma is known since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is the recourse to the preceding difference of observation and action opting for action. [...] The communication itself is thwarted by the protective function of latency. The way out is liberating action. [...] Action is always faster than observation.<sup>27</sup>

But, in the case of the social sciences, blind activism cannot serve as an adequate way out of this quandary. If we accept Luhmann's diagnosis the challenge is twofold: The social

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<sup>24</sup> Luhmann, "Soziologische Aufklärung," 71.

<sup>25</sup> Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme*, 459.

<sup>26</sup> Luhmann, "Soziologische Aufklärung," 85.

<sup>27</sup> Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme*, 468-469. [English translation actually available!]

sciences have to serve as a tool to realize *and* to reduce the complexity we are constantly confronted with.

What is at stake is the ability to consider many possibilities and to still act quickly: relationships of material and social diversity and lack of time, which need to be optimized. What is at stake is a compensation of time pressure resulting from increasing interdependencies.<sup>28</sup>

One even though partial response to this problem is Luhmann's suggestion

to resume the path, which in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was still regarded as outside of reason, as irrational: to adjust the criteria of observation to the necessity of the acceleration of observation und thereby to the reduction of complexity.<sup>29</sup>

At the end of the day, action is inevitable. In order to inform any kind of decision-making social scientists need to think about ways of reducing the complexity their second-order observations of a multitude of perspectives have produced. Niklas Luhmann had an answer to this problem: the formation of systems. In his eyes, only systems are capable of processing information in a meaningful context enhancing the ability to select among possibilities and to guide choices.<sup>30</sup> Luhmann's systems theory allows dividing an infinitely complex world into different systems of still significant, but limited complexity. It clarifies "a complex structure of conditionally associated problems and possible solutions originating from permanent systemic problems and eventually from the complexity of the world."<sup>31</sup> Thereby, systems theory prepares the ground for further simplification through decision-making theories. The latter reformulate the problems laid out by systems theory turning them into decidable problems.<sup>32</sup> This is the level, on which Luhmann argues, when he proposes the two alternative models of personnel policy (regular promotions vs. promotion *and* demotion according to the requirements of the administrative system). Eventually, the complex systems-theoretical deliberations presented in texts like *Reform und Information* and *Reform des öffentlichen Dienstes*, which have their conceptual underpinning in even more complex and highly abstract theoretical works, boil down to two concrete and clear-cut suggestions that policy-makers in Bonn would have been able to put into practice.<sup>33</sup> However, such shirtsleeve

<sup>28</sup> Luhmann, "Soziologische Aufklärung," 77.

<sup>29</sup> Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme*, 470. For an attempt to put such an acceleration of second-order observation into practice see Paul Rabinow and Talia Dan-Cohen, *A Machine to Make a Future. Biotech Chronicles* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>30</sup> Luhmann, "Soziologische Aufklärung," 77.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>33</sup> However, Luhmann's efforts turned out to be fruitless. In an interview, he expressed his frustration: "Ich war zum Beispiel einmal in einer Kommission zur Beamtenreform, in der sowohl die konservative wie die progressive Position undurchsetzbar waren. Ich habe viel Zeit auf die Mitarbeit an der Ausarbeitung einer ganz neuartigen Konstruktion des öffentlichen Dienstes verwendet, die dann zwar von der Kommission, nicht aber von der Regierung akzeptiert wurde. Sie sehen, meine politische Tätigkeit war völlig umsonst, ich habe nur versucht, das in die Zusammensetzung der Kommission einprogrammierte

proposals are already beyond systems theory in the strict sense and decisions in favor of one option and against another one have to be based on down-to-earth first-order observation (certain convictions about what is and what ought to be the case).<sup>34</sup>

For an anthropology of the contemporary the question is: Is there a way of simultaneously increasing and reducing the complexity of its second-order observations that avoids the high of theory and remains closer to the often confounding richness of ethnographic observation. Luhmann's impressive clarifications are achieved for the price of abstracting from the excess of things to be seen in the world. The challenge is a meticulous inquiry into this abundance that remains connectable to practical decision-making processes. Such processes could be greatly enriched by the deliberate integration of the manifold perspectives opened up by second-order observations.

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politische Patt zu unterlaufen. In diesem Zusammenhang machte ich die Erfahrung, wie wenig Politik in der Lage ist, strukturelle Alternativen zu sehen und die Konsequenzen für eine politische Position zu durchdenken.“ Luhmann, "Archimedes und wir," 136. Similarly, in his essay on deconstruction as second-order observation, he discusses a hearing of the American Senate concerning the role of homosexuals in the US Army and comes to the conclusion: "Der amerikanische Senat wird wohl kaum je auf den Gedanken kommen, Experten auf dem Gebiet der Dekonstruktion oder der Beobachtung zweiter Ordnung zu Rate zu ziehen, und es würden solche Experten, wenn man sie dennoch befragen würde, kaum mit politischen Lösungen aufwarten. Doch wäre es nicht denkbar, daß das politische System, von seiner eigenen Rhetorik geblendet, übersieht, daß eine komplexere Fassung des Problems durchaus denkbar ist?“ Luhmann, "Dekonstruktion," 265-266.

<sup>34</sup> As to the difference between theoretical analysis and policy, see Luhmann, "Reform des öffentlichen Dienstes," 239.

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