

Call for papers to the

LUHMANN CONFERENCE 2024

Guiding distinctions. Observed with social systems theory



Theme

The concept of “guiding distinctions” refers to distinctions – such as economy/society, bourgeoisie/proletariat, nature/culture, system/environment, structure/agency, theory of society/social technology, or, most recently, analogue/digital – that have instructed theory-building, framed research, sparked controversies, or dominated discourses in the social sciences and humanities.

Whereas the classics in these fields primarily seemed to offer singular and dichotomic categorizations, subsequent generations of scholars have started to recognise the interrelated nature of these categories, along with their usefulness as generative tools rather than passive descriptors. The concept of intersectionality, for instance, was designed to explore how race, class, and gender converge to produce and sustain complex social observations.

Grounded in seminal work by Spencer Brown (1979), von Foerster (1979), and Maturana and Varela (1980), for social systems theory in the tradition of Niklas Luhmann (1995a) distinction is the as the mode of operation of all organic, psychic, and social systems, including his own theory: “a system is the difference between system and environment” (Luhmann, 2016, p. 44). This “paradox of observing systems” (Luhmann, 1995b) is further complicated by the circumstance that systems need to draw distinctions not only to maintain themselves, but also to observe other systems.

A subsystem of society as the compassing social system, science is defined and demarcated by the distinction between truth and untruth. Science, including social science and the humanities, employs countless theories and methods to apply this distinction to all other distinctions that make up life in its organic, psychic, and social environments.

Venue:

Inter-University Centre (IUC),
Dubrovnik, Croatia

Address:

Don Frana Bulića 4, 20000
Dubrovnik, Croatia

Submission date (abstract):

15 June 2024

Conference dates:

10-13 September 2024

Pre-conference dinner:

09 September 2024

Early Career Program:

09 September 2024

Whereas social systems theory does not claim a monopoly on truth, its claim is nonetheless universal insofar as there is no domain this theory cannot be applied to. The theory is, therefore, sufficiently self-confident to accept the challenge to not only identify, but also parallel process the most relevant guiding distinctions of the social sciences and humanities.

A systems-theoretical focus on these guiding distinctions is, first, of general relevance as a mode of sceptical reflection on past, present, and future trends in our fields. Second, such a focus is required to meet the challenges of the ongoing digital transformation of society and the academic disciplines charged with illuminating the latter.

ICT and the increasing availability of digital data are dramatically changing the processes of research and knowledge production in social science and the humanities. While the pace, scale, and scope of methodological innovation in digital humanities and the computational social sciences are impressive, theory development is much less dynamic in our fields (Ossewaarde 2019; Roth 2019). This mismatch is problematic as digital methods do not only provide ever-larger datasets for the testing of established theories, but also allow and even call for new forms of digital theorising (Kitchin 2014). New forms of theorising might even imply the translation of analogue guiding distinctions into digital ones (Roth, 2023; Watson, 2023).

Against this backdrop, contributions to the Luhmann Conference 2024 might discuss what have been the most influential guiding distinctions in the history of theorising in the social sciences and humanities. Contributions might also identify distinctions that appear particularly influential today, or venture into explorations of emerging or yet-unknown guiding distinctions that might influence the future of our fields. We would also be keen to read submissions devoted to the historical context, the evolution, or trends of one or several guiding distinctions. A focus on interplays or interactions of guiding distinction would also be intriguing, as would be one on the opportunities and challenges of their integration into universalist theory architectures based on binary distinctions. Yet other contributions might discuss the performance or functionality of selected guiding distinction(s) for specific other systems or for society as a whole. Most welcome are furthermore papers that discuss whether extant guiding distinctions are still useful in a digital transformation context, as are contributions that defend selected (sets of) guiding distinctions regardless of their compatibility with digital theorising in the social sciences and humanities. This list of suggested topics is non-exclusive as long contributions are within the scope of the deliberately broad theme and the necessarily selective spirit of the conference.

References

- Kitchin, R. (2014). Big Data, new epistemologies and paradigm shifts. *Big Data & Society*, 1(1), 2053951714528481.
- Luhmann, N. (1995a). *Social systems*. Stanford University Press.
- Luhmann, N. (1995b). The paradox of observing systems. *Cultural critique*, (31), 37-55.
- Luhmann, N. (2006). System as difference. *Organization*, 13(1), 37-57.
- Maturana, H. R., & Varela, J. F. (1980). Autopoiesis. In J. F. Varela & H. R. Maturana (Eds.), *Autopoiesis and cognition: The realization of the living* (pp. 59-134). Reidel.
- Ossewaarde, M. (2019). Digital transformation and the renewal of social theory: Unpacking the new fraudulent myths and misplaced metaphors. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 146, 4-30.
- Roth S. (2019), Digital transformation of social theory. A research update, *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 146, 88-93.
- Roth, S. (2023). Truth Tables, True Distinctions. Paradoxes of the Source Code of Science. *Systemic Practice and Action Research*, 1-7.
- Spencer Brown, G. (1979). *Laws of form*. New York: E. P. Dutton.
- Von Foerster, H. (1979). *Cybernetics of cybernetics*. Urbana: University of Illinois.
- Watson, S. (2023). N-Lemma for paraconsistent logical analysis: modelling systems with distinct but non-exclusive categories. Manuscript.

Submission

Abstracts of 500–1000 words should reach the corresponding conference convenors (*) by 15 June 2024 at the latest. Full papers should be circulated prior to the conference.

Best paper award

The Next Society Institute at Kazimieras Simonavicius University in Vilnius is pleased to sponsor an award of EUR 500 for the best paper submitted to the Luhmann Conference 2024.

Important dates

Submission opens on the website luhmannconference.com on 01 December 2024.

Submission deadline for abstracts is 15 June 2024.

Letters of Acceptance will be distributed by email 30 June 2024.

The conference programme will be sent to registered participants on 15 August 2024.

The Luhmann Conference 2024 pre-conference dinner is planned for 09 September 2024.

Luhmann Conference 2024: 10-13 September 2024.

Programme Committee

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Organisational background

Annual conferences on applications of Niklas Luhmann's system theory have been held in cities such Munich, Copenhagen, Tromsø, Stuttgart, Montreal, Boston, London, or Stockholm. Translations of Luhmann's books are still more numerous, introductions and theoretical contributions are flourishing. The same is true for empirical studies applying system theory for comparative studies, case studies, historical analyses, or to professional fields.

Publication opportunities

Selected papers submitted to the Luhmann Conference 2024 will be invited for submission to a dedicated special issue of Management Revue. Socio-Economic Studies [ESCI, Scopus, CABS**, VHB C].

The programme committee is negotiating the terms and conditions of a second dedicated special issue of a journal in the broader field of social sciences.

Previous Luhmann Conferences have or are currently being published in edited volumes or special issues of journals such as:

- [Roth S. \(in progress\), *Environments. Observed with social systems theory*, *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*.](#)
- [Roth S., Zazar K., Clausen L., and Stingl de Vasconcelos Guedes T. \(in print\), *Scientific Communication. Observed with social systems theory*, *Systemic Practice and Action Research*.](#)
- [Roth S., Laursen K., and Harste G. \(2021\), *Moral communication. Observed with social systems theory*, *Kybernetes* 51\(5\).](#)
- [Roth S., Heidingsfelder M., Clausen L., and Laursen K. \(2021\), *George Spencer Brown's "Design with the NOR"*. With related essays, *Bingley: Emerald*.](#)
- [Febbrajo A. and Harste G. \(2013\). *Law and Intersystemic Communication. Understanding "Structural Coupling"*. London: Ashgate 2013](#)

The Inter-University Center Dubrovnik

In the 1980s, Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht and Ludwig Pfeiffer co-organised a number of great conferences at the [Inter-University Centre of Post-Graduate Studies \(IUC\)](#) in Dubrovnik in the former Yugoslavia, now Croatia. Starting in 1981, Luhmann attended several of these conferences. Conference proceedings were published in a series of five rather big volumes at the important Suhrkamp Verlag (*Der Diskurs der Literatur- und Sprachgeschichte*, 1983; *Epochenschwellen und Epochenstrukturen im Diskurs der Literatur- und Sprachgeschichte*, 1985; *Stil*, 1986; *Materialität der Kommunikation*, 1988; *Paradoxien, Dissonanzen, Zusammenbrüche*, 1991). Many of these works were dedicated to semantic history and to a system theory of art.

The IUC was shelled during the siege of Dubrovnik in 1991, and for some years the conferences could not take place. Today, the IUC has been completely restored both physically and in spirit.

Practical information

The conference fee is EUR 100 for early career scholars (PhD students and post-Docs two years from their first PhD) and EUR 150 for everybody else. The amount is due in advance by bank transfer once your submission is accepted and registration confirmed.

The IUC is located in the vicinity of the famous medieval city of Dubrovnik. Accommodation is available in one of the many Dubrovnik hotels (Hotel Imperial is the closest to the IUC, but rather expensive. Hotel Lero is more affordable and located about 1.5 kilometres (1 mile) from the IUC. Another popular form is one of the many private accommodations (Room or "Sobe") which are relatively cheap and can be found everywhere. Do make sure to book well in advance to get the best price. The [IUC](#) also provides affordable but limited accommodation in the building itself. As of 01 January 2023, Croatia is part of the Euro area (eurozone).

The conference fee includes catering during coffee breaks. All other meals are taken at restaurants and cafés in town.

The Dubrovnik airport is situated about 20 kilometres south of Dubrovnik and connected to the town by regular shuttle busses. Travel by car and ferryboat is somewhat more complicated, though beautiful.

The weather in September is normally sunny and 20-30 C, though rain is not impossible.

Luhmann community groups and supporters @social media



Anglophone Facebook Group:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/2834060864/>



Germanophone Facebook Group:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/132998763464111>



Scandinavian Facebook Group:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/147050955334098/>



Next Society Institute:

<https://twitter.com/nexsocinstitute>



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Luhmann Conference:

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