

# Habermas & Luhmann

## *clash of the last titans*

- what do they allow us to see?
- how did they come to see it?



# German sociology in the 1960s & 70s

- all-encompassing theory of society
- politics of the late 1960s





# differences 1 of 2

- people

L: Weber—Parsons—Luhmann

H: Marx—Adorno/Horkheimer—Habermas

- theoretical frameworks

L: systems theory (& functionalism)

H: action theory (& dialogue/interaction)



# differences 2 of 2

- politics

L: observation / objectivity

H: engagement / participation



one theme

*communication*

linguistic turn (Wittgenstein & speech act theory)  
(hermeneutic > Habermas ; somewhat parallel to French structuralism)



# Habermas

- *main project:*  
understanding society **as a whole** to  
effect change, make a better society
  - target of broad criticism
- *base:*  
marxism, the critique of reason
- *addition:*  
symbolic interaction, communication



# theory of communicative action

- work  $\neq$  interaction
  - different logic
  - universal logic
- (political) goal
  - undistorted / dominance-free *discourse*



**crucial distinction!** from Marx to Mead via a step-back to Hegel  
Man—Nature (work)  $\neq$  Man—Man (interaction – has a tendency to reciprocal recognition)  
teleological vs. communicative / intersubjective



# discourse

- four claims:
  - understandable, comprehensible
  - objective truth
  - normatively right
  - subjective truthfulness, sincerity

related to types of action: strategic, normative, dramaturgical, communicative



# ideal speech situation

- four characteristics:
  - equal chances to initiate & participate
  - equal chances for presentation & interpretation of arguments
  - no hierarchy / dominance
  - no false presentation of intentions

related to types of action: strategic, normative, dramaturgical, communicative



# ideal speech situation

- the best argument wins      consensus!
- how?
  - appealing to *universal* reason

by enlightening those who participate about misconceptions and the best way to communicate



# Habermas

*universal* reason

in communication as the political goal > dominance free discourse



# Luhmann

- one goal
    - “theory of society; duration: 30 years; costs: none”
  - lack of a comprehensive, unified theory for sociology *his ideal is science*
- ➡ target of enraged criticism



# system | environment 1 of 2

- difference in complexity
  - interior logic | external disorder
  - allows proper description & analysis
- not parts that make a whole
  - system with subsystems  
each with its own code



# system | environment 2 of 2

- constituted by operations  
that follow up on other operations
- self-referring operations constitute the  
limits of the system  
rest = environment
- connection to environment?
  - structural coupling / external impulses



# natural science 1 of 2

- cybernetics
  - reduction of complexity in the system  
vs. high complexity of the environment



# natural science 2 of 2

- biology
  - autopoiesis
- social evolution:
  - from stratification                      unequal (sub)systems
  - to functional *differentiation*      equal subsystems
- progress – efficiency



# “Systemtheorie”

- detached observation & constructivism  
self-referring, no transcendental or  
material other
- generalization, differentiation, codes



# modern society

- functional differentiation  
as a historical development that system  
theory adequately grasps
- result: higher *efficiency*
- universal logic of the system  
supposedly value-free



# Luhmann

universal logic



# the clash

- System vs. Lebenswelt
- “Habermas is offering only speculation”
- “Luhmann is conservative, stabilizes the existing order”

Luhmann: winner by points (Habermas integrates his concept)

similarity Durkheim (norms) – Marx (conflict)



# outro 1 of 2

- what do they allow us to see?
- how did they come to see it?

communication (abstract codes vs. political ideal)

the **efficiency of differentiation** / **ideal discourse**

**grand theories:** inspired by natural science models / inspired by a grand integration of sociology's many **paradigms**



# outro 2 of 2

- what did they *not* see?
  - power
  - space, materiality & the body
- too big to fail?
  - no!

➡ *end of modernist theory*

Power: Habermas – Foucault > **discourse!**

Ritzer: Luhmann = Lyotard (subsystems = micronarratives); but: no grand narrative!

Habermas = decidedly historical and specific = faded more quickly than Luhmann