

William Rasch

The Self-Positing Society

in: Niklas Luhmann: Theories of Distinction, Redescribing the Descriptions of Modernity, ed. William Rasch, Stanford University 2002

Introduction pg.4: The aim of this introduction is to [weave an intellectual narrative incorporating tales of self-reference, paradox, and the partiality of observation that have intrigued 20th-century practitioners of science, logic, philosophy and social theory](#). That is, this introduction is more concerned with offering a genealogy of Luhmanian motives than with a direct paraphrase of specific positions and utterances. I hope readers will then be able to insert Luhmann into this narrative as they make their way through these essays.

Self and Not-Self

The [problem of self-consciousness](#), as the German idealists well knew, [is the problem of paradox](#). [How can the self refer to itself without making of itself something other than itself](#), something that can be referred to, pointed to, as if it were not what was doing the pointing? In Fichte's Science of Knowledge, for instance, we have a clear articulation of the puzzle, along with a proposed solution.

[For pure consciousness to be conscious of itself, it must be conscious of itself as the other; thus it must split itself in two](#). It must, that is, posit itself as a self-positing subject and as reflected object. [The self-positing of the self must also posit its own negation, the not-self](#). Such positing and counter-positing have a common origin (the self) and occur simultaneously. The not-self is no afterthought; rather, it emerges with the logically presupposed self. We therefore have a logical contradiction - or, at least, a conflict that Fichte structures logically. In its mode of self-positing, the self can be captured logically as identity:

$A=A$; in the coterminous mode of counter-positing (of the not-self), the self loses its identity, so to speak: $A=\text{not-}A$. Logically, then, positing should preclude counter-positing, as the latter would cancel the former. Instead, [a middle that ought to be excluded is included](#): A is both A and not- A .

Fichte specifically utters this contradiction as the paradoxical result of the two principles - positing and counterpositing - with which he starts. "insofar as the not-self is posited," he writes, "for the not-self completely nullifies the self".

The paradox is resolved by introducing the notion of quantity and the finitude of space. "How can A and $-A$, being and nonbeing, reality and negation, be together without a mutual elimination and destruction?" Fichte asks. "They will mutually *limit* one another" (Fichte 1982, 108). Self and not-self occupy finite and partial areas of space, each serving as the limits of the other. Thus the self and not-self become devisable - indeed, they define that very notion. One is tempted to say that self and not-self emerges limit functions of each other. [Reference to a self becomes reference to a double negation](#), for if reference to the other is reference to not self, then reference to self becomes reference to not-self. But with this solution of the paradox, a second paradoxical distinction arises, one that must be resolved in a different manner from the first. The posited self that is limited by its not-self is no longer the absolute self that initiated all positing and counterpositing. As a quantifiably determinate self limited and reflected by its other, the posited self stands in opposition to or contra-distinction from the absolute self. That self still remains - and must remain - invisible and without predicate if it is to serve as the undivided ground for the unity of the difference between self and not self. The absolute self is "equal to itself" and "posited as in devisable; whereas the self to which the not-self as opposed is posited as a devisable.

Introduction pg.6: Hence, insofar as there is not-self opposed to it, the self is itself in opposition to the absolute self". Thus, with one stroke, the initial act of self positing effects to

cuts - the one severing self from not-self in the limited space of mutual determination, and the other severing the absolute self from the limited space of the (now) empirical self and its indispensable partner, the not-self. **We witness, then, the paradox of a self that alienates itself from itself in the very act of self-positing.**

Now, **ever since Adam and Eve discovered naked self-observation, a perceived alienation has automatically provoked a longing for a reconciliation.** The legacies of both the German idealists and the German Marxist traditions are no different in this regard. Whereas the former might stress the ethical overtones of what is essentially described as a logical problem, the latter imaginatively correlates the antinomies of thought - subject and object, intuition and concept, theory and practice - with the contradictions of social relations brought about by the capitalist economic order. Accordingly, the reconciliation in one sphere presupposes revolutionary action in the other; yet the correct revolutionary action presupposes simultaneous imaginative reconciliation. Correct theory, in other words, presupposes correct practice, which in turn is based on correct theory.

The “dialectical” effort of “critical” theory, then, has been to move societies through its self-alienated state to a higher unity consciously articulated in the realisation of autonomy and justice. Revolutionary transformation of society both preproposes and brings about the desired harmonious state of affairs. Though temporarily the movement is always conceived to be a progression of history, logically the movement moves back, retracing the steps of paradox to erase them.

We, however, may wish to look upon Fichte’s creation narrative not as a fall from grace in need of world-spiritual compensation but as **a headlong plunge into irreversible complexification.**

And we may wish to look as this complexification as the unfolding of the social world in which we find ourselves. And we may *not* wish to consider this unfolding of the social world, whether we care over it or not, as is sinful one. Were we to view “alienation” in this more neutral light, we would **direct our attention not to the absolute that this prior to distinction but to the absolute of distinction and thus to the productivity of paradoxes.**

Unlike those, then, who see the task of social theory to be the construction of “counterfactual” Utopian projections, we may find ourselves quite content **to remain in the fallen and limited state of distinction in order to see how the social world, which determines itself by positioning the difference between A and not-A, builds its forms.**

We may not like these forms. We may not like their consequences. But we would have to realise that every effort to scramble back “up” and out of the world of forms toward an impossible, primary unity leads us further “down” into the world that we cannot escape because it is the world that we continually make. What Fichte would have given us, therefore, is not a prediction of human freedom as “our highest practical goal” (Fichte 1982, 115) but rather, more modestly, **a rudimentary calculus of self-reference based on Aristotelian logic.** Fichte may have interpreted it for consciousness, but it could just as well be interpreted for a variety of other self-referential machines or systems. We could, for instance have given the following narrative twist to the basic Fichtean scheme:

“Let us then consider, for a moment, the world as described by the physicist. It consists of a number of fundamental particles which, if shot through their own space, appear as waves, and are thus, of the same laminated structure as pearls or onions, and other waveforms called electromagnetic which it is convenient, by Ockhams's razor, to consider as travelling through space with a standard velocity. All these appear bound by certain natural laws which indicate the form of their relationship. Now the physicist himself, who describes all this, is, in his own account, himself constructed of it. He is, in short, made of a conglomeration of the very particulars he describes, no more, no less, bound together by and obeying such general laws as he himself has managed to find and to record. **Thus we cannot escape the fact that the world we know is constructed in order (and thus in such a way as to be able) to see itself.**

This is indeed amazing. Not so much in view of what it sees, although this may appear fantastic enough, but in respect of the fact that it can see *at all*.

But *in order to do so*, evidently it must first cut itself up into it least one state which sees, and it least one other state which is seen. In this severed and mutilated condition, whatever the sees is *only partially itself*.

We may take it that the world undoubtedly is itself (i.e. is indistinct from itself), but, in any attempt to see itself as an object, it must equally undoubtedly, **act*** (actor, antagonist. We may note the identity of action with agony.) **so as to make itself distinct from, and therefore false to, itself. In this condition it will always partially elude itself.**

It seems hard to find an acceptable answer to the question of how or why the world conceives a desire, and discovers an ability, to see itself, and appears to suffer the process. That it does so is sometimes called **the original mystery**.

Perhaps, in view of *the form* in which we presently *take ourselves to exist*, the mystery *arises from* our insistence on *framing* a question where there is, in reality, **nothing** to question. However it may appear, **if such desire, ability, and sufferance** be granted, the state or condition that it arises as an outcome is, according to the laws here formulated, absolutely unavoidable. In this respect, at least, there is no mystery. We, as universal representatives, *can* record universal law far enough to say ...and so on, and so on you will eventually construct the universe, in every detail and potentiality, as you know it now; but then, again, what you will construct will not be all, for by the time you will have reached what now is, the universe will have expanded into a new order to contain what will then be. In this sense, in respect of its own information, the universe must expand to escape the telescopes through which we, who are it, are trying to capture it, which is us. **The snake eats itself**, the dog chases its tail.

Thus the world, whenever it appears as a physical universe* (unus = one, vertere = turn). **Any given (or captivated) universe is what is seen as the result of a making of one turn, and thus is the appearance of any first distinction, and only a minor aspect of all being, apparent and non-apparent. Its particularity is the price we pay for its visibility.**), must always seem to us, its representatives, to be **playing a kind of hide and seek with itself**. What is revealed will be concealed, but what is concealed will again be revealed. And since we ourselves represent it, this occultation will be apparent in our life in general, and in our mathematics in particular. What I try to show, in the final chapter, is the fact that we really knew all along that the two axioms by which we set our course were mutually permissive and agreeable. At the certain stage in the argument, we somehow cleverly obscured this knowledge from ourselves, in order that we might then navigate ourselves through a journey of rediscovery, consisting in a series of justifications and proofs with the purpose of again rendering, to ourselves, irrefutable evidence of what we already knew. [George Spencer Brown LoF105](#)

This lengthy passage comes from an explanatory note to chapter 12 of George Spencer Brown's *Laws of Form*. We will have occasion below to examine what the purported laws allow us to see, or, more accurately, what they allow Luhmann to see, but for now, as a fast introduction to **the notion of self-reference that plays such an important role in Luhmann's thought**, I simply wish to examine some of the implications of this passage.

We see that **what Fichte called consciousness, Spencer Brown calls the "world" or the "universe" - with observation enabled by physical, not to mental, devices**. Though physical, observation is nonetheless still self-observation. **The self-positing self becomes the self-examining universe** that uses physical elements (e.g. humans and telescopes) to explore its own physical nature. **In so doing, it must "posit" itself as devisable. It "cuts" itself up into self ("one state which sees") and not-self ("one other state which is seen"). What sees is no disembodied mind but "a conglomeration of the very particles" it describes; thus, what sees, sees itself, but "only partially itself"**.

We also understand, however, that Spencer Brown's observation of the self-observation of the world is enmeshed in its own paradox, for Spencer Brown's description takes on the form of a total description. It is as if his observation hovered over and above the world, as if that world were projected on to a two-dimensional plane, like a map. **It seems, in other words, that the theses that all observation is partial is itself not partial, as if it's description of the world's description of itself as partial could encompass both the primal unity of the universe and the fallen, "post-cut" state.**

But if all observation and description is partial, then so must be the observation that makes this description. It, too, must operate by the same rules, the same necessity to “cut” and the same limitation this necessity brings about. Thus, the unity described as “the world” must be a unity presupposed, not a unity observed. Indeed, Spencer Brown merely assumes that there is such a unity that undergoes this operation (“We may take it that the world undoubtedly is itself”), but he never claims to “see” it.

The thesis that all descriptions are partial needs to presuppose the fiction of totality against which the notion of partiality can be understood. But the world (or absolute self) remains an inconceivable and inaccessible horizon.

Any “project” to recuperate or reunite the totality only pushes it beyond further horizons as the universe grows in response to the telescopes constructed to encompass it. Thus, not only can one not get back to the original unity, one can never really perceive the first cut. All cuts are already made in a devisable and cut world. The primary cut disappears beyond the horizon along with the primal unity.

In fact, that horizon is itself already a limit, a cut, a distinction, one that cannot be gotten beyond, precisely because it serves as the presupposition or “ground” for all subsequent cuts, even the “first” cut that severs what “sees” from what “is seen”.

In the terms of the natural laws of the physicist, observation requires a non-equilibrium state - the difference between negentropy and entropy. As Lawrence Sklar notes:

In order for there to be sustained, complex organisms (like ourselves) that could perform observations, there must be energy flows. Only these can counteract the normal process of equilibration and keeps a highly structured active organism, like a life form, in operation. But such energy flows presuppose a nonequilibrium situation. So if there are to be observers at all, they must be found in the small, deviant, nonequilibrium portions of the universe.

This, then, would be Spencer Brown's “original mystery”, **the differentiation of order** - a highly improbable defiance of the second law of thermodynamics - **that makes the “desire, ability, and sufferance” of observation possible.**

Boe: desire – vgl. Volition (Gotthard Günther)

And our observation of Spencer Brown is no different. Any reference to the world is self-reference, and any self-reference requires external reference, a not-self against which it can be distinguished.

The unity of self-reference and external reference - which is to say, the ineluctable linkage and reciprocal necessity of the two - requires **the difference of unity and distinction** that is marked by **the horizon beyond which we cannot go.**

The “first” cut that marks the emergence of self and external reference is made in a space that has already been cut, a cut space that allows further cuts to be made.

It is against this background, then, that we can understand Luhmann's repeated claim that social theory is a form of **social self-observation.**

Boe: [LuhmannGG866](#)

Just as one can think consciousness only from within consciousness and see the world only from within the world, one can observe society only from within society and thus observe it only partially. Banal sounding, the claim is at once a matter-of-fact and polemical. The reality it purports to describe aggressively displays **the limits of self-observation**, and any attempt to view society normatively, as if from the outside, is greeted with bewilderment. Norms, too, are socially embedded, not transcendently given.

Society, as an informationally closed system, defined by communication and internally differentiated into function systems, is, to use Spencer Brown's hyperbolic phrase, "severed and mutilated".

This condition is seen to be one of the inescapable facts of modern society. Luhmann neither longs for the view of the whole nor bemoans its absence. Jeremiads against reification, rationalisation, neutralisation, or alienation are no more part of his repertoire than demands the communal participation or discursively achieved consensus.

We live in a "severed state", and our observation is possible precisely because it is partial. Society's lack of universal normativity of consensus and integration, simply reminds us that we inhabit a universe that insistently exceeds the power of its own telescopes. Yet the contention that society can be seen only from within society and only partially is a total observation. It therefore cannot help but fall victim to paradox. Paradox, however, is not the perplexing dead end of a false path but every path's point of origin. **Consequently, a theory of society must above all account for this paradox and the limits that it exposes - not in order to overcome or evade paradox but too include it as a constituent moment of the universe that the theory describes.**