

# Social Systems (Writing Science)


By Niklas Luhmann


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A major challenge confronting contemporary theory is to overcome its fixation on written narratives and the culture of print. In this presentation of a general theory of systems, Germany's most prominent and controversial social thinker sets out a contribution to sociology that reworks our understanding of meaning and communication. Luhmann concedes that there is no longer a binding representation of society within society, but refuses to describe this situation as a loss of legitimation or a crisis of representation. Instead, he proposes that we search for new ways of coping with the enforced selectivity that marks any self-description under the conditions of functionally differentiated modern society. For Luhmann, the end of metanarratives does not mean the end of theory, but a challenge to theory, an invitation to open itself to theoretical developments in a number of disciplines that, for quite some time, have been successfully working with cybernetic models that no longer require the fiction of the external observer. *Social Systems* provides the foundation for a theory of modern society that would be congruent with this new understanding of the world. One of the most important contributions to social theory of recent decades, it has implications for many disciplines beyond sociology.

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#### Review

"*Social Systems* presents Luhmann's startling vision of society as a self-producing or autopoietic system of communications. . . . Theories of self-reference are the way forward now in a host of disciplines—the hard sciences, law, literature, psychology, and philosophy. Luhmann's reproduction within sociology of the new systems theory of self-reference vastly enriches our understanding of the possibilities of systems theory for other disciplines." (Arthur J. Jacobsen *Yeshiva University*)

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