The Role of the Environment in System Creation in Luhmann and Hegel: Between Imagination and Reason[1]

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Abstract: This paper will aim to accomplish two things to show Luhmann's and Hegel's support of language and communication as dependent on culture, but also their differences with respect to how culture is formed in conjunction with the environment. This paper will firstly show how Hegel distinguishes between the imagination and reason in a different manner from Luhmann, as Hegel considers them logically connected while Luhmann considers them as coextensive. Secondly, this paper will show how reason and imagination create culture through the environment via dialectical idealism in Hegel and a poly-contextural constructivist approach in Luhmann.

Keywords: Culture, Environment, Hegel, Luhmann, Systems Theory.

> "Traditions also fail the Hegelian test of showing that their goal is some
> final rational state which they share with all other movements of thought."
> -Alasdyr MacIntyre *Whose Rationality? Whose Justice?* (MacIntyre: 1988 p. 373)

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If we are to philosophize on culture, the environment, nature, and social systems, it is important to consider their genealogies and what allows them to remain intact. Luhmann suggests that culture should be considered in terms of a closed social system based on communication that is distinguished from yet unified with the environment in which it is produced. Hegel on the other hand can be interpreted to consider culture deriving from the stages of consciousness that finalize in self-reflection through the philosophical speech that allows society to exist. Despite their similarities and differences in thought, comparing the philosophical views of Luhmann and Hegel is a worthwhile venture exposing important insights into the philosophy of culture and what role the environment and social systems can play in its development.

The problem Luhmann identifies with reflection based on reason derived from Modern European rationality is that in virtue of its power to differentiate, it provokes an irrational and unknowable 'otherness' to arise. Such identification of difference for Luhmann, however, requires the imagination rather than mere reason. We can see in the meontological sense that anything unobservable is unknowable and not labelled as such through mere rational differentiation, but rather requires a created image of that which is not present. Such epistemological gaps in knowledge are what the imagination reveals itself through. Cultural systems for example do not perceive the difference they have between themselves and their respective environments in the form of rationalized unifications based on reason alone. Modernity's rationality labels such differences themselves as unities, which is an interpretivist error for Luhmann due to such differences on their own being seen to mistakenly be considered parts of the system.

Communication within a system takes place for Luhmann as a complexity that involves simultaneous self-observation, subjects within a system, and a system within an environment, representing the poly-contextual attribute of social systems (Alvarez,

2003, p. 14). Such systems cannot be observed from outside themselves as the function of Modernity's rationality might assume, since systems can only self-reflect. The routine operations that exist within systems distinguishes the latter from their natural environments while the former do not come in contact with the environment despite systems being open to environmental reception (Luhmann, 1993, p. 49). For Luhmann, human subjects are responsible for the difference between the environment and system in virtue of human communication, yet they are not responsible for the environment itself. It can be taken that the subjects 'are' the environment for the system, and thus the system can communicate within itself, about itself, or even about its environment; however, it cannot communicate with itself nor with its environment, since such communication does not lead to the self-creation which is imperative for society as a system to exist (Luhmann, 1993, p. 51).

The European society derived from Modernity can be considered holding an interpretation of meaning that derives from the centre of a social system thus an anthro-centric meaning serving as the manifestation for all human construction. Everything from the top of that system, the perspective derived from the system itself, is to be considered that which provides rationality. What the system does not provide according to this European rationalism, is irrational and excluded (Luhmann, 1994, p. 69). It is the case then that any unity employed within the system must be constituted by the system itself not from the external 'irrational' environment (Luhmann, 1993, pp. 50-51). Luhmann strays from this Modern European conception of rationality, as there is a predicament within its logic. What an individual considers rational behavior for example is included in the system as an inclusion contrasted against that which is excluded and thus considered irrational (Alvarez, 2003, p. 301). These rational limits for Luhmann cannot be thought of as deriving prior to the system's creation nor from a

reality beyond the system, alluding to the notion that there is the need for the imagination rather than mere reason to allow for the operation of such unity and separation between the system and environment to occur (Alvarez, 2003, p. 25).

The perspective derived from the system to recognize these limits, rather than from the observer or human subject, can be observed in virtue of the Romantic idea of Modernity having the capacity to reflect on itself. Such a reversal by Romanticism explains why today we see any criticism on Modernity as proceeding from the Enlightenment's reflected image provided by Romanticism (Gadamer, 1975, p. 274). The subject is de-centred as the source of meaning due to this reversal, in turn giving Luhmann a Romantic yet Modern perspective on society. Society as a system considers its own perspective as that which allows for the auto-generation of social systemic limits that are irrational and imagination-dependent.

The auto-referential nature of a system through its structures and elements produced by itself can thus be considered a concept that designates the unity a system has with itself as independent of observation from other systems (Luhmann, 1993 p. 52). In addition, social systems cannot have unilateral control that is asymmetrical, as one part of the system cannot control another; there can be asymmetrical relations and power struggles within systems, however. Now we can see from Luhmann his support of reason and imagination producing a constructivist reality where the world's paradox represents the environment through an unobservable mode that is hidden from rationality yet revealed via the imagination (Luhmann, 1994, p. 79). In Hegel, reality is what appears to us immediately through the phenomenal world. This provokes the need for the designation of reason in Hegel to be what is immediately before us *prima facie*, allowing us to see how both Hegel and Luhmann support the existence of reality through their ideas on the imagination and reason.

What is considered 'rational' for Hegel involves the fundamental process providing the *telos* of consciousness, as it immediately exists before the human self as appearance (Verene, 1985, p. 6). What does not appear to the human self is not rational because what lies outside the bounds of rationality is not considered real, thus showing Hegel's support of a closed system of reality where whatever lies outside of that system (i.e. the environment) is not real nor rational. The imagination's first moments in Hegel are what provide the power for self-differentiation for his epistemological theory of systems (Kennouche, 2013, p. 96). Hegel thus manifests human will's freedom through this reflection, as self-consciousness derives from a dialectic based on the alterity between object and subject. Intersubjectivity is therefore required for realizing the Absolute in Hegel through self-consciousness which is to reach the final, ultimate, and complete unconditioned and all-encompassing form or concept (Maybee, 2020).

The environment for Hegel derives from the human subject's inter-subjectivity through a dialectical process where there is an examination of consciousness internally as it appears to itself; reality is not accessed therefore from the subject. For Luhmann on the other hand, a system's self-creation is automatic, self-sufficient, and dependent upon human subjects who are conscious and communicate with each other to construct it making the system 'real' in the form of an object of investigation from within itself (Luhmann, 1993, p. 50). Both Hegel and Luhmann then support subjects (human selves) who possess the consciousness required for society as a social system to exist. The environment for Luhmann is outside the system but still exists just as much as the social system exists as reality, whereas Hegel would consider the environment as an irrational 'unknown'. The human subject for Luhmann 'stands' outside the social system because it is not essentially a part of it while in Hegel the subject and its communication are

necessary for society to emerge. We can garner from this juxtaposition that for Hegel, the subject truly exists while the social system truly exists for Luhmann.

Meontology, as the study of non-being, can be interpreted differently for Luhmann and Hegel in terms of systems theory. Luhmann considers the environment as a 'being' or 'entity' whereas in Hegel the phenomenology of spirit is what appears immediately contingent upon what the human subject perceives ideally by knowing what is observable. The unobservable environment for Hegel does not actually exist; however, the self-creation of consciousness is akin to the self-creation of systems in Luhmann: the *autopoeisis*. Both philosophies inform that reason is of importance for such self-creation. If myth is rational for Hegel for example, it will allow for philosophy to enter the contemporary culture of the world, so long as myth and art connect to reason (Verene, 1985, p. 75). Reason is what provides consciousness' certainty as reality by allowing for the self-reflection of consciousness, which in turn allows for reality to be 'real'. Reality and its accompanying society are constructed as a system via self-consciousness in Hegel, but contrastingly in Luhmann this occurs poly-contextually. Both philosophers it should be mentioned can be taken to consider that reason is linked to the imagination for reality's systematic construction via the environment. In Hegel, reason provides resistance to the imagined ideal reality of consciousness, thus reality develops in contrast to reason's selfhood as it is revealed in self-knowledge via philosophical speech (Verene, 1985, p. 40). The self-creation of social systems in Luhmann on the other hand occurs via communication because it is the only genuine social activity in its incapacity to take place whilst providing self-observation (Luhmann, 1993, p. 45).

The main difference between Luhmann's and Hegel's conceptions of imagination and reason is that the former sees them as inseparably co-extensive,

whereas the latter sees reason as logically deriving from the imagination. Hegel's system is based on reason as he considers it to dominate understanding due to the latter merely bringing consciousness to the inverted world where the realm of laws is what the immediate experience of reality becomes; false reality is inhibited from the activation of understanding alone (Verene, 1985, p. 73). Reason counters understanding and thus allows consciousness to remain outside the inverted world for Hegel, so it becomes 'a thing in itself' or *Ansich*. Reason therefore dominates reality where the appearance presented in front of us as 'a thing in itself' is conceived of as reality through reason. Self-consciousness derives from unity's revelation as the two things that are 'in themselves': self-consciousness and appearance (a.k.a. reality). This leads to an uncertainty that manifests in the inverted world and the evolution of self-consciousness (Verene, 1985, p. 67).

Luhmann can be interpreted as departing from Hegel's notion of reason, in that he does not place reason as the basis for social systems. We see in Hegel that he considers metaphor employed by rationality derived from the human subject as capable of allowing the creation of society. The imagination is the reference point for meaning, whereas Luhmann departs from any dialectical or human-centred source for meaning, instead considering the imagination as the horizon for which reason can operate through communication. Culture and society thus arise for Hegel when reason 'springs out' of the imagination logically and philosophical consciousness forms itself to allow for 'the self that is directed to itself', without seeing the self as an object separated from the world (Verene, 1985, p. 65). Such a consciousness makes a return to the inverted world and is convinced the world is something 'in itself' as well. This provokes consciousness to link the imagination to both recollection and reason and allow consciousness to regain its sense of possession or 'mineness'; self-consciousness thus needs something to

show itself how to recollect once again (Verene, 1985, p. 79). Reason is what allows self-consciousness to be the final stage of consciousness and recollect or imagine consciousness as a possession of self-consciousness, allowing for Hegel's *Bildung* (formation) to cultivate the subject (Verene, 1985, p. 74).

Hegel's reason as a form of idealism involves an immediacy that allows self-consciousness to experience a possessed single placed reality where individuality can also be experienced in contrast to the inverted world. This reversal of the experience of the world at the last stage of consciousness provides it with *Ansich* (the in itself) as thought becomes separated from appearance and reality (Verene, 1985, p. 66). This partition initiated by thought can be owed to what Panicidis (2011) claims: "the impulse of thought to give itself reality [...] the limitless infinitude of absolute abstraction, or universality, the pure thought of itself (p. 62)." We will now see why *The Phenomenology of Spirit* attempts to retrieve the 'unseen' from the 'seen' in Hegel through his ideas on perception and recognition and how it stands with Luhmann's ideas on observation.

Reflection on the 'unity' that difference contains between an environment and a system for Luhmann is not in the Hegelian sense a dialectical process. Such a process involves having the difference between the subject and object sublated as self-differentiation of the subject through which the subject as a knowing 'I' becomes a self through the object (Kennouche, 2013, p. 107). The starting point for the analysis of a system for Luhmann is the difference it has with its environment which is the premise of self-referential operations of the system itself. The system essentially cannot define itself without alluding to its environment (Alvarez, 2003, p. 281). Systems are thus forms with properties that are distinguished from each other as the unity of a difference, thus a form that consists of the distinction of the system with respect to its environment

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alike the distinction between something and its context (Alvarez, 2003, p. 282). The system and environment thus constitute the two parts of a form and can exist separately, and yet cannot exist one without the other. The unity of this form is presumed to be a difference despite this difference not being fundamental to the operations of the system (Luhmann, 1993, p. 37).

Systems are thus distinct from their environment for Luhmann in that the system is operationally closed and capable of producing by itself its own culture, elements and structure. Different social systems are distinguished from each other via mechanical processes not just their environments (Luhmann, 1993, p. 6). What is important is the reciprocal unity that exists between environment and system, as without an environment the system could not exist, thus they have an undissolvable unity in which the difference the system makes with its environment is what allows for the self-reflective operations of a system to take place (Luhmann, 1998, p. 42). This shows the importance of the closure of a system via the closure of its limits, but also how the imagination assists with system creation in Luhmann. Hegel likewise elaborates difference for identity, as the 'I' attempts to distinguish itself from itself with the consequence of feeling merely conscious of itself, which shows that consciousness is acquainted with itself only when it synthesizes with the object (Kennouche, 2013, p. 124).

We can see that it is the imagination that provides meaning in both Luhmann and Hegel. Since we do not share between us the same objective reality for Luhmann because there is no such objective reality, we exist in a poly-contextural constituted world and culture. Instead of being created in Hegelian terms dialectically or in Humanism through a subject-centred meaning creation, the Luhmannian culture is constructed via the imagination and the language that communicates it with the aim of questioning Modernity's self-understanding (Luhmann, 1994, p. 77). This happens in

Hegel with the dialectic process where the imagination, by rejecting the tyranny of the object injects life into the differentiation process for self-consciousness and thus for the realization of Absolute Spirit (Kennouche, 2013, pp. 109-112). What is imagined to be the Absolute as the manifestation of itself via self-revelation is projected onto human consciousness (Kennouche, 2013, p. 124).

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