

Deducing natural necessity from the possibility of purposive activity: the scientific realist logic of Habermas' theory of communicative action and Luhmann's systems theory.

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Abstract:

In deducing natural necessity from the intelligibility of science, Roy Bhaskar suggests that any social activity presupposes this ontology. This paper considers Bhaskar's observation in light of Habermas' theory of communicative action and in light of Luhmann's conception of action systems. Neither Habermas nor Luhmann claims to be scientific realist. I nonetheless attempt to show that Habermas and Luhmann veer toward scientific realism in their attempts to resolve contradictions within Weber's idealist theory of action. In the process I hope to develop the argument that natural necessity is implied in the possibility of purposive activity.

Introduction: Bhaskar's deduction of natural necessity from the intelligibility of science.

Roy Bhaskar deduces natural necessity from the intelligibility of science as both an instrumentalist and a substantive social process. He observes that the (instrumentalist) effort of closing experiments only makes sense if natural systems of cause and effect are *typically* open. Open systems in turn imply an ontological distinction between causes and effects.¹ The intelligibility of experimentation thus presupposes the existence of powerful (and liable) entities. The unimpeded action of these entities must produce certain effects, of natural necessity. The intelligibility of experimentation thus rules out the Humean reduction of causal laws to empirical regularities.

Bhaskar maintains that natural necessity is implied also in the intelligibility of science as a substantive process. He observes that science is practiced within social paradigms and that paradigms are themselves open to rational criticism and change.² If this is so, then scientific laws are irreducible to the consciousness or worldview of the scientist

¹ Bhaskar, 1978. p.13

² Bhaskar rejects the Kuhnian argument that progress is possible only within paradigms. He insists that if paradigm shifts are at all conceivable, then the paradigms in question must share at least *some* precepts, even though the development of a new paradigm renders its specifics rationally incommensurable to the old paradigm. Bhaskar, 1978, p185,191ff, 17.

(as Kantians suppose.) Bhaskar insists that the substantive development of science makes sense only if the active objects of scientific inquiry exist intransitive to experience.

In deducing natural necessity from the possibility of science, Bhaskar suggests that this ontology is implied in the possibility of purposive activity generally. Intervention in nature is possible only if casual laws operate in open systems.³ Perception and reference are meaningful only if the perceived or referred to entities typically exist in space and time intransitive to the human perception of and communication about them. The possibility of qualitatively changing experience implies that objects "have a distinct being in space and time from the experiences of which they are objects."⁴

Purposive activity is *effort* and scientific realists observe that effort is intelligible given natural necessity. Scientific realists understand purposive activity as a *struggle* to identify, to grasp, to imagine, to alter, complex entities which exist intransitive to consciousness, but which nonetheless affect us.

They emphasise the strenuous, absorbing passion with which human beings engage the world - a passion so characterised because human beings do not simply utter the Word; "Let there be light!" Nor do we mechanically react.

In appealing to the integrity of human effort, scientific realists appeal also to the integrity of human error. If the universe *was* a flux of atoms and knowledge of it was indeed sensation or pure imagination, then it would be extremely difficult to be mistaken about this universe - so long as one was "normal" and willing to observe. Given an empiricist epistemology, fundamental error about the world arises from turning away from it. For Kantian subjectivists the one fundamental error is turning away from oneself.

The point is that the individuals posited by Hume and Kant have nothing to learn from being mistaken. On the other hand scientific realists see being mistaken as an integral, natural part of struggling to understand and act upon and with entities that exist intransitive to consciousness. As Bhaskar puts this; "To be a fallibalist about knowledge, it is necessary to be a realist about things. Conversely, to be a sceptic about things, it is necessary to be a dogmatist about knowledge."⁵

³ Bhaskar, 1978. p.117

⁴ Bhaskar, 1978. p.31.

⁵ Bhaskar, 1978. p.43

The following paper considers the suggestion that natural necessity is implied in the possibility of purposive activity, in the integrity of effort and error. It does so by examining two major sociological theories of action – Habermas’ theory of communicative action and Luhmann’s systems theory. Neither Habermas nor Luhmann would regard themselves as scientific realist. Indeed each attempts to develop (what they and most sociologists consider to be quite opposite) solutions to the problems of classic sociological (or Weberian) idealism. I will nonetheless attempt to show that there is a scientific realist logic to Habermas’ and Luhmann’s theories and that this logic stems from Habermas’ and Luhmann’s attempts to develop the theory of action beyond Weberian idealism.

The first section of the paper briefly contextualizes Habermas and Luhmann within Weberian idealism. The second section examines Habermas’ argument that the communicative activity (intersubjectivity) is intelligible given individuals’ capacity to distinguish between the subjective, the social and the objective world. I attempt to show that such a distinction itself presupposes the existence and operation of natural powers, independent of consciousness. The third section examines Niklas Luhmann’s argument that social action systems develop in response to threats or challenges posed by an environment external to such systems. I argue that this external environment must ultimately be a substantial world containing potentially active objects.

2: The possibility of purposive activity: Habermas, Luhmann and the problems of Weberian idealism.

Far from the world of scientific realism, Max Weber argues that all structures are the products of individuals’ intentions. Being the product of intention, each structure is an intrinsically rational or unified “meaning-complex of action.”⁶ Each “meaning-complex” is therefore rationally incommensurable with any other. Social formations arise and develop to the extent that individuals (voluntarily or involuntarily) happen to share a single “meaning-complex.” Because the meaning-complex or directing social intention is substantially unified, the internal differentiation of Weberian social systems must be purely instrumentalist.

Being instrumentalist, Weberian sociology also appears to be both teleological and technically determinist. If society is essentially an instrument of subjective intentions,

⁶ Weber, 1947. p101,- 107, 118.

then ostensibly non-functionalist social behaviours or patterns *must* be defined as “irrationalities” from the perspective of a technically superior social instrument. Within such theories, it would seem that any *specific* social structure is *constitutively* a solution to the technical problems of its predecessor.

Classic sociology thus explains the emergence of markets as a solution to pre-modernity’s inefficient conflation of means and ends. It then suggests that the technical deficiencies of market organisations (the conflict of interest between producers and consumers and between producers themselves) can in turn be ameliorated by planning.⁷ Instrumentalism appears to leave itself no option but to adopt the axiom that “civilisation develops because it cannot fail to develop.”⁸

Is there any way that instrumentalist social theories can avoid being teleological? Weberians might remind us that society is the implement of a *particular* subjective intention. A course of instrumentalist logic therefore expires with the cessation of *its* substantive framework, however inexorable this course of logic may seem. To put this another way, instrumentalism can only be recognised *as* instrumentalism to the extent that a substantively different social system is at least *possible* or conceivable.

The difficulty is that substantively differing intentions or meaning-complexes are not rationally commensurable in a Weberian idealist framework, as we’ve noted. Therefore the existence of possible substantive alternatives must be construed as potentially fatal to the existing social system. The upshot is that Weberians must thematise the centuries long development to modernity as either a relentless course of instrumental logic or an ever- looming disintegration of the substantive purpose, as either a flourishing systemic differentiation or a legitimation crisis.⁹ Neither of these courses is conceivably purposive activity. (It is spatio-temporally inconceivable that a society could be both.) Weberian sociology thus presupposes but cannot conceptualise substantive rationality (substantive change.)

This is not simply a difficulty for Weberian sociologists. It is the essential problem with any theory that posits human consciousness as purely active and the objective world as purely passive. Idealists on one hand presuppose at least the possibility that world views can differ and change. In lieu of empirical verification, we can only assume that “things-in-themselves” are formless if these things could be potentially structured *in more than one way*.

⁷ Weber, 1968 p973.

⁸ Durkheim, 1973. p121-2

⁹ Exemplified in Weber’s conception of legitimation crisis.

On the other hand it is impossible to rationalize or *conceive* of a potential plurality of worldviews within an idealist framework. In reducing form to the pure activity of self-consciousness, idealists rule out the possibility of explaining the potentially differing and changing forms that self-consciousness itself may take.

So the problems of Weberian instrumentalism are symptomatic of a fundamental inconsistency within idealist epistemology itself. It should not therefore be surprising that post-Weberians veer away from idealism in attempting to develop a substantively dynamic theory of action. This becomes apparent if we examine Habermas' and Luhmann's ostensibly idealist but essentially critical realist theories of social action. In the process of considering the theory of communicative action and systems theory, I hope to develop the argument that natural necessity is implied in the possibility of purposive activity. Let us consider Habermas firstly.

3: The intelligibility of communication: Habermas' theory of communicative action.

Habermas is ostensibly an idealist. For Habermas, the very conception of objects presupposes activity within (what he calls) the "Lifeworld." Lifeworld consciousness is analogous to the Kantian "unity of apperception." It intrinsically, immediately integrates disparity into substantive meaning.¹⁰

Habermas emphasises that, because the Lifeworld is presupposed in experience, it cannot be itself empirically scrutinised. Like Kant's transcendental "unity of apperception" and Kuhn's paradigm, the Lifeworld is simply *known*, always, ever, with absolute certainty. Habermas therefore insists that it is meaningless for individuals to inquire whether their Lifeworld is empirically dependent on anything else. In his' words:

Meanings-whether embodied in actions, intentions, products of labour, words, networks of cooperation or documents - can be made accessible only from the inside-symbolically prestructured reality forms a universe that is "hermeneutically sealed."¹¹

So like the Weberian "meaning-complex of action", the Lifeworld is intrinsically a unity in virtue of the structuring power of consciousness. The

¹⁰ Habermas, 1985. p.125

¹¹ Habermas, 1984. p.112

difference is that each Weberian "meaning-complex" is strictly the property of an individual while Habermas' Lifeworld is shared by a community¹² This is an important difference, since Habermas attempts to show that consciousness is substantively rational or dynamic to the extent that it is intersubjective. Habermas in turn equates intersubjectivity with language, insisting that the Lifeworld is constituted in language.¹³

Habermas therefore predicates intersubjectivity and substantive rationality upon the intelligibility of communication, upon the possibility of performing (what Austin and Searle call) a successful "illocutionary act." An illocutionary act is an attempt by two or more persons to understand, to develop meaning through linguistic communication.¹⁴

Under what conditions is an illocutionary act successful? Firstly, according to Searle, the speaker must state that *something* is the case. The speaker assumes that the listeners do not already know this something. The speaker believes that he or she is conveying something new to the listener and not merely re-affirming common values or some already shared experience. If individuals typically used language without conveying or intending to convey new meanings, then language would not be dynamic or communicative. It would merely coat an unchanging, unchangeable, pre-linguistic "essence."

Searle emphasises that an illocutionary act presupposes the integrity of the speaker's intention.¹⁵ Habermas in a similar sense observes that the manipulative use of language (what is called a "perlocutionary act") is essentially *parasitic* upon a successful illocutionary act.¹⁶ In other words, manipulative or deceptive speech is effective insofar as communication is typically open and sincere.

Further, an illocutionary act is successful only if the listeners recognise the speaker's intention to communicate and grasp the meaning of his or her speech. In Searle's words;

¹² Habermas, 1985. p.148

¹³ Habermas, 1985. p.125

¹⁴ Searle, 1999. p.137

¹⁵ Searle, 1999. p.143

¹⁶ Habermas, 1984. pp. 290-291

When I intend to communicate, I intend to produce understanding. Understanding will consist in the grasp of my meaning – the intention to communicate is the intention that the hearer should recognise my meaning intention. The communication intention is the intention to produce in the hearer the knowledge of my meaning by getting him to recognise my intention to produce in him that knowledge.”¹⁷

As Habermas explains, the illocutionary act is successful only if its content is in principle confirmable or deniable. The listeners must be capable of recognising *grounds* for confirmation or denial, if they are given the opportunity to do so. ¹⁸ He believes that the content of a speech act can only evoke this "yes" or "no" response if the speaker uses predicates in such a way that other members of the Lifeworld can recognise their reactions to similar situations. ¹⁹

Habermas therefore insists that intelligible communication presupposes individuals having at least the *concept* that there is a source of experience that is both novel and potentially common to both speaker and listener. In other words, Habermas believes that intersubjectivity presupposes individuals having a *concept* of the objective world. Drawing on Popper, Habermas predicates communicative rationality upon individuals' capacity to distinguish between the "subjective" world, the "social" world and the "objective" world. In his words;

Only to the extent that the formal reference system of the three worlds is differentiated can we form a reflective concept of "world" and open up access to the world through the medium of common interpretative efforts, in the sense of a cooperative negotiation of situation definitions.”²⁰

Drawing on Piaget, Habermas develops this argument to depict substantive rationality as the progressive separation of one's ego from one's awareness of the objective world.²¹ Indeed, Habermas posits a substantively rational development from primitive to modern Lifeworlds in term of individuals'

¹⁷ Searle, 1999. p145.

¹⁸ Habermas, 1984. p.317-8

¹⁹ Habermas, 1984. p.17

²⁰ Habermas, 1984, p69.

²¹ Habermas, 1984. p.69

increasing capacity to so abstract the “personal” from the “social” from the “objective.” Drawing on Horton, Habermas explains that the members of primitive (what he calls “mythical”) Lifeworlds are unable to distinguish their personal views from normative tradition and natural events. They are therefore unable to critically reflect upon any particular action or event without their entire universe collapsing. In Habermas' words, mythical world inhabitants:

...do not have at their disposal a formal concept of the world that could secure the identity of natural and social reality in the face of changing interpretations of temporalised cultural traditions..nor (in such a world) could the individual rely on a formal concept of the ego that could secure his own identity in the face of a subjectivity that has become independent and fluid.²²

Habermas believes that the contents of modern Lifeworlds are more abstract and therefore more open to criticism and revision. The modern individual is more capable of recognising himself or herself as a specific and changeable kind of “person.” Modern individuals are allegedly more capable of recognising their society as a specific and therefore changeable kind of interaction with nature. Habermas therefore depicts this substantive rationality as the continual shifting of the boundaries between subjective, social and objective.²³

Given Habermas’ idealist epistemology, the critical question is how and why individuals should at all *conceive* of an objective world. If human reality is structured in (linguistically) consciousness then how could individuals be aware that there is a source of new, genuinely communicable experience?

We’ve seen that Habermas posits the abstraction of the three world concepts as the outcome of communicative action itself. But this is merely circular reasoning. Recall that Habermas’ predicates the very possibility of successful illocutionary action upon individuals’ already possessing abstract world concepts. We must conclude that Habermas’ position is fundamentally inconsistent. He cannot sustain the concept of communicative (substantive) rationality in an idealist epistemological context.

²² Habermas, 1984. p.51

²³ Habermas, 1984 p.70

The logic of Habermas' argument suggests that communicative rationality presupposes an objective world containing entities that are capable of producing substantially experientiable (and therefore genuinely communicable) events. This becomes apparent if we consider Rom Harre's reiteration of the conditions for a successful illocutionary act. Harre observes that a speech act is successful, it is sincere, novel for the listeners and potentially affirmable or refutable *only* if the speaker has actually experienced (or has been informed of another's experience) of an objectively existing something in the world.²⁴ If a speech act refers to the operation of some natural power, (and Harre notes that this is likely, given the abundance of power predicates in our descriptions of the world) *then this natural power must objectively exist.*²⁵ Harre's argument can be more generally stated by observing that *reference is meaningfully about a state of affairs irreducible to the imagination of the referrer.* We may thus deduce natural necessity from the intelligibility of communication.

I have traced Habermas' theory of communicative action in an attempt to develop Bhaskar's suggestion that natural necessity is implied not simply in the intelligibility of science but in the possibility of purposive activity generally. This conclusion also underlies Luhmann's theory of dynamic action systems. Like Habermas, Luhmann leans toward scientific realism while remaining ostensibly within the Weberian idealist tradition. Let us consider Luhmann's *The Differentiation of Society*.²⁶

4: Luhmann on the possibility of systems in time and space.

For empiricists, systems can only be mathematical or analytical. In other words, empiricists *define* systems as aspatial and atemporal. On the other hand, Kantian idealists recognise that systems are spatio-temporally ordered. However, idealists reduce this spatio-temporal ordering to the intrinsically unifying activity of consciousness. We have seen that Weberians articulate this substantive unity by defining social systems as the integrated instruments of a single directing intention. We have briefly noted the fundamental inconsistency of this idealist position. Idealism presupposes, yet cannot conceptualise substantive rationality. Luhmann's systems theory could be interpreted as a response to this problem as it presents itself in classic sociology – for Luhmann tries to imagine *how* a system could actually begin, develop, how it could *be* in time and space.

²⁴ Harre, 1986. pp.165 ff

²⁵ Harre, 1986. p.165

²⁶ Luhmann, 1982.

Luhmann asserts that a system cannot conceivably exist without an environment external to it. In his words; "It only becomes necessary (and for that matter possible) to recognise or identify a system when this system is distinguished and demarcated from its environment."²⁷ Now Luhmann is not simply alluding to a system needing "material." He is not alluding to consciousness requiring a lump of "raw matter" on which to act. He is not merely restating the Kantian view that intelligible experience presupposes a real (if utterly scattered) "manifold" of things-in-themselves.

Luhmann specifically insists that an entity internally develops in relation to an environment which is *in itself* qualitatively determinate and active. Luhmann emphasises that the system's environment puts up a real presence. He variously describes this environment as "hostile", "troublesome", "uncontrollable", "problematic", "threatening." The system does not construct this environment, it must "negotiate" with it in order to survive. The system needs to develop *its* particular quality, builds *its* complexity to avoid being substantively swallowed by this determinate-in-itself environment. Luhmann therefore defines the structural technique of differentiation as a "matching" of external and internal complexity.²⁸

Luhmann believes that the determinate qualities of the external environment help to explain the system's specificity as well as its internal dynamic. He observes that the system relates to some forces in its external world and not to others. The system therefore builds one form of complexity rather than another. The multiplicity of negotiation by the same token gives the system richness and depth.

Luhmann observes that the system's outcomes are to some extent historically contingent and uncoordinated, given this qualitative heterogeneity of the external environment. Luhmann observes that the qualitative variability of the environment may indeed require strategically incompatible responses on the part of the system. As he explains:

If we conceive of systems as open-systems-in-environments, structural changes have to presuppose non-coordinated events in systems and

²⁷ Luhmann, 1982. p.327

²⁸ Luhmann, 1982. p..286

environments. Non-coordinated events are contingencies in themselves with respect to their coincidence and their conjectural causality.²⁹

In consequence of its specificity, its possible contradictions and the contingency of its outcomes, Luhmann's system is not an inexorable unfolding of a unified technical logic. The system can *substantively* change direction. It is open to multiple outcomes, given the active, qualitative heterogeneity of its external environment. Luhmann in these terms rejects Weber's linear means-end model. By the same token he rejects Habermas' argument that systems rationality presupposes a culturally homogeneous or unified substantive "Lifeworld." Given a system's struggle with a substantive-in-itself environment, the substantive unity of this system is a goal to be achieved. It is not an *a priori* given.

Luhmann in these terms questions classic sociology's tendency to either ignore the environment external to a system or to assume that this environment uniquely exists for the system's convenience. Indeed, Luhmann advocates replacing the classic Weberian model of strategic systems unity with a "living organisms" analogue. As he explains:

In general the conception of systems is still defined traditionally as a network of relations that integrates parts into a whole. But underneath this idea of a purely internal ordering of parts into a whole, a different conception of systems is demanding our attention. According to this, the significance of system building lies not merely in a purely internal ordering of the parts into a whole, but instead in a system's negotiation with its environment. The problems that arise in this regard are what determine whether the internal ordering of the system will succeed and maintain itself in the face of threats posed by its environment. The guiding concept is that of living organisms.³⁰

Luhmann articulates the "living organisms" analogy, firstly, in terms of the operations of large, modern organisations.³¹ Luhmann maintains that, given the extreme complexity of its environment, a large organisation cannot effectively operate as a totally cohesive unit working toward a single end. He

²⁹ Luhmann, 1982. pp.252-253

³⁰ Luhmann, 1982. p.37

³¹ Indeed, Luhmann was inspired to reject the classic Weberian chain-of-command model after reading studies on how actual organisations operate.

observes that contact with the environment qualitatively varies between different levels of the organisation. The "chief executive" often lacks detailed knowledge of and control over subordinates' various dealings with the outside world. Luhmann observes that exploitation of this knowledge cannot be simply "commanded." There is a decisive shift of gravity from top to bottom in consequence of the subordinates' unique negotiation with specific aspects of the external environment, As Luhmann explains; "Commands from the blue are increasingly prompted, requested or even formulated by their recipients. As a result, the flow of information from bottom to top becomes more "interesting."³²

Luhmann maintains that a large organisation can develop quite contradictory goals, given this extreme complexity of its external environment. He insists that contradiction does not in itself spell the organisation's destruction. In his words; "The ends pursued by an organisation, even its "ultimate" and "highest" ones can be modified, reinterpreted or completely altered without the identity of the organisation having to disappear and a new one having to be founded."³³

Luhmann in these terms argues the Weberian chain-of-command model is incapable of explaining behaviour within corporations and state bureaucracies. In Luhmann's view:

Simple categories of means and ends, or command and obedience, while adequate for the purposes of everyday life, fail as a means for providing a scientific account of human thought and action. Fundamentally, they are ideas of single, linear relationship. A causes B. They do not work as conceptual tools for grasping highly complex processes such as the conditions of actual behaviour in large organisations.³⁴

Luhmann contextualises this "open systems" theory of organisations within a "living organisms" model of societal subsystems. Luhmann posits each subsystem facing a distinctive environmental cluster comprised of other subsystems within an overriding or shared social system. Each subsystem thus faces distinctive challenges which do not occur on the level of the social

³² Luhmann, 1982. p.32

³³ Luhmann, 1982. p.28

³⁴ Luhmann, 1982. p.36

system as a whole. For example, the economy experiences political events in a different manner from the cultural, religious or educational subsystems. To use one of Luhmann's examples, compulsory school attendance and mass education are different environmental problems for the political system, the economic system, familial, religious and medical systems.³⁵ Luhmann believes that a subsystem develops its distinctive type of complexity by negotiating to meet the challenges posed by *its* unique environmental cluster that. As he observes:

Functional differentiation requires a displacement of problems from the level of society to the level of subsystems. This is not simply a process of delegation or decentralisation of responsibilities and not simply a factoring out of means for the ends of society. The displacement integrates each specific function into a new set of system/environment references and produces types of problems and solutions that would not, and could not, arise at the level of the encompassing system.³⁶

Luhmann emphasises that internal differentiation is not otherwise rationally conceivable.

Luhmann specifies the "relative autonomy" of each subsystem in terms of three system-environment references. In terms of its *function*, a subsystem relates to the social system as a whole. It relates to the various other subsystems in terms of (what Luhmann calls) its "input and output performances." Finally, each subsystem has a relation to itself. It can be self-reflective. Luhmann emphasises that these three system-environment references are by no means identical or reconcilable. For example, there may be a tension between forward-looking performance and backward-looking self-reflection. There is contingency, unpredictability and change within the social system because each subsystem is not equal in its capacity to distinguish between and balance function, performance and self-reflection. The economic subsystem might be highly functional, for example, while the political subsystem is highly performing and the religious and cultural systems extraordinarily self-reflective.

³⁵ Luhmann, 1982. p.231

³⁶ Luhmann, 1982. p.241

Luhmann believes that these 'imbalances' negate the Weberian means-end model as an explanation of complex modern societies, taken in conjunction with the distinctive problems and solutions thrown up by each subsystem's unique internal environment, Luhmann insists that:

...the social primacy of a specific function cannot serve as an integrative formula or minimal ethics for all system/environment relations. This is because, in a sense, the whole is less than the sum of its parts. In other words, functionally differentiated societies cannot be ruled by leading parts or elites as stratified societies (to some extent) could be. They also cannot be rationalised as by means/ends chains as a technocratic conception would suggest. Their structural complexity can be adequately formulated only by models that take into account several systems/environment references at once.³⁷

Now, if the distinctive character of each subsystem arises from its unique engagement with other subsystems, the initial distinction between subsystems itself presupposes an active, qualitatively determinate environment for the social system as a whole. Luhmann's social theory therefore distinguishes two kinds of environment - the external environment common to all societal subsystems and a separate, internal environment for each subsystem. As he explains: "The signpost indicating the road to concretisation can be found only if we go back to the distinction between outer and inner differentiation. Outer or primary differentiation is the general precondition for evolution as such at any level of physico-chemical, organic or sociocultural evolution."³⁸

Now this external environment common to all subsystems *can only be the natural world*. Even if we consider various societal or cultural systems providing environments for each other, the difference between them *must* ultimately invoke a determinate, non-human reality. A system's activity in time and space therefore presupposes this system as part of a world containing other structured, powerful entities.

Luhmann himself does not fully take this further step. This is ironic, considering his adoption of the "living organisms" analogy. In taking this further step, Luhmann would have to completely re-think his idealist

³⁷ Luhmann, 1982. pp.238-239

³⁸ Luhmann, 1982. p. 253

assumption that social action systems are essentially instrumentalist and not also substantive. In failing to fully consider that the system's external environment is ultimately the natural world, Luhmann leaves the system floating in ether. Having rejected the Weberian-Habermasian argument that systems develop to implement individuals' intentions, Luhmann is then unable to specify essentially *what* it is that systems do, other than "survive." We find Luhmann nebulously positing that:

...rationality on the level of individual actions is not the same as rationality on the level of social systems - the rationality of a system cannot be ensured simply through the rational action of its participants. It presupposes new combinations of meaning, perhaps even different categories of understanding that belong to the system itself.³⁹

This may well be true. However, unless we specify what and how these "new combinations" exist in the natural world, we cannot determinately act within or upon the system.

5: Conclusion: deducing natural necessity from the possibility of purposive activity.

I have outlined Habermas' and Luhmann's theories as reactions to problems within the Weberian or classic sociological theory of action I have suggested that Habermas and Luhmann veer toward scientific realism because the contradictions of Weberianism stem from this theory's idealist foundations. At the same time I hoped to have developed to some degree the argument that natural necessity is implied in the possibility of purposive activity. It strikes me that Luhmann and Habermas are essentially committed to the integrity of human effort – as are scientific realists such as Bhaskar and Harre. Habermas attempts to grasp language as an absorbing activity, not merely a set of symbols or a façade for the spirit. Luhmann posits systemic unity as a goal to be achieved in struggle with the environment. Bhaskar similarly depicts the “arduous task” of day-to-day scientific hypothesizing, research and experimentation as a drive to uncover new, deeper, explanatorily more basic strata of reality.⁴⁰ Each of these theories brings to mind Hegel's insistence that:

³⁹ Luhmann, 1982. p.22

⁴⁰ Bhaskar, 1978, p211.

The life of God and divine intelligence can if we like be spoken of as love disporting with itself, but this idea falls into insipidity if it lacks the seriousness, the suffering, the patience, the labour of the negative... True scientific knowledge demands abandonment to the very life of the object, or which means the same thing, claims to have before it the inner necessity controlling the object, it forgets to take that "general survey" which is merely a turning away from its content, back into itself."⁴¹

To conclude, the work of Bhaskar, Harre, Habermas and Luhmann shows that scientific realism is essentially a *value-commitment* to the integrity of human effort. It is essentially this value-commitment which leads scientific realists to reject the empiricist and idealist depiction of the human sense of natural necessity as a history-long reification played out by cowards, weaklings and fools. Ultimately, scientific realism is distinguished from empiricism and idealism, not by what it says about the world, but by what it acknowledges about us. As Harre observes; "In the end one's adherence to scientific realism is an act of moral commitment rather than a wholly rationally grounded realization of some inescapable conclusion from incorrigible premises."⁴²

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⁴¹ Hegel, 1970, p81.

⁴² Harre, 1986. p145.

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