

Book: *The Concept of the Network Society – Post-Ontological Reflections*

Editors: Niels Lehmann, Lars Qvortrup, & Bo Kampmann Walther

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Reviewer: Chris Miles

This collection of essays edited by Lehmann, Qvortrup and Walther is one of seven books in a series dedicated to publishing the results of a research program entitled “Media and Democracy in the Network Society” that was funded by the Danish Research Agency between 2002 and 2006 and that brought together a diverse collection of scholars from the broad disciplines of media studies and the social sciences. Although the title of the research program itself clearly presupposes the existence of such a society, the five essays in the collection under review are often concerned with an intense critique of current understandings and constructions of what a ‘network society’ might constitute.

The book’s brief introduction, co-authored by the editors and subtitled “The mundanisation and gödelisation of epistemology”, orientates the reader towards the particular theoretical paradigm that informs all the pieces in the collection. Although remaining nameless and without context at this early stage (the introduction has the declarative tone of a manifesto), the theory that the authors look to is founded upon “the fact that the observation is always an inseparable part of the object being observed”. Most people familiar with the course of mainland European sociology over the last 30 years would recognize these terms as belonging to the realm of Niklas Luhmann’s systems theoretical approach to a social theory of communication and, indeed, Luhmann’s work constitutes the guiding spirit throughout this collection. The use of the phrase “post-ontological” in a number of the essays here, as well as in what one of the contributors, Jean Clam, would call the “denominator” of the book’s title, is an interesting example of what looks like an attempt to re-position Luhmann’s work away from its roots in cybernetics and systems theory and place it more within the evolving tradition of literary and cultural theory as represented by the historical legacy of structuralism, post-structuralism and Derridean deconstruction. Indeed, Niels Lehmann’s long essay on the “Network Society”, centered tellingly at the middle of the book, is dedicated to demonstrating exactly why Luhmann’s “constructivist version of systems theory” (p. 134) can provide a “model for conceiving the work of art” that is “less concerned with getting at ‘the other’ of metaphysics than deconstruction” (due to the inevitable entanglement with metaphysics that such a focus necessarily seems to produce) and more successful than deconstruction in cutting “the ties to the aesthetics of the sublime” (p. 159). Lehmann’s essay, though only very marginally concerned with the network society as examined by the other contributors in the volume, nevertheless serves to expansively gloss the advantages of Luhmann’s approach to social communication over a deconstructionist one and as such it serves as the calm, measured theoretical underpinning to the whirlwind of elegant applications of Luhmann-mediated second-order cybernetics and systems theory that surround it in the collection. If post-ontology is to have its *converts*, I think they might well arrive through an engagement with Lehmann’s discourse.

Understandably, a number of contributions in the collection scrutinize the work of Manuel Castells (the Portuguese sociologist responsible more than anyone else for the formalization of the network metaphor in contemporary social theory). Bo Kampmann Walther’s opening essay does a very convincing job of problematizing Castells’ core concepts of *space of flows*, *topology*, *variable geometry* and the *network society* through a demonstration of the contradictions and “quasi-metaphysical” assumptions informing their use. Central to Walther’s critique of Castells is the inability of his work to come to terms with the issues arising from the observational complexity of networks. Castells’ focus is predominantly upon the ontological complexity emerging from an appreciation of the (seemingly stable) nodal points of a network, whereas an understanding of networks as built from relations will inevitably engage with observational complexity. Walther goes on to try and “save’ the theoretical rationality of Castells’ network concept” (p. 36) by reading it through the terms of Bruno Latour’s Actor Network Theory in which a network is constituted by the “relational ‘dimensionality’” of the human and non-human actors and their differing “possible epistemologies” (p. 40). For Walther, Castells (along with all of “traditional macro-sociology”) exhibits the “naive positivist view of objects or actors as existing in themselves prior to any participation in eco-social and semiotic networks of interactions” (ibid.). Latour, working in sympathy with the cybernetic and systems movements that provide Niklas Luhmann with his theoretical approach, approaches “a post-ontological understanding” of “network society” that accepts the fact that “network objects can never be steady configurations” and that the only certainty is the “contingency of the observer” (p. 42). Castells, then, should be observed for the relations that he observes (remembering that observation is an act of creation, of distinction-making).

Lars Qvortrup’s “Network, Knowledge and Complexity” follows on from Walther’s essay very effectively, being “an analysis of the network society as a name that society has given itself in order to be able to talk about itself as a society” (p. 47). Qvortrup is able to build upon the detailed analysis of Castells’ work provided by Walther so there is little by way of repetition even though both scholars are approaching Castells from similar theoretical perspectives. This is just one example of the ways in which this collection has been put together with a careful eye towards conceptual development and argumentative integration. Qvortrup, like Walther, sees the real weakness of Castells’ work in its inability to provide a

satisfactory account of how the “immense complexity loading of modern society” (p. 65) is handled. Starkly pitting Niklas Luhmann against Castells, Qvortrup sees the most convincing solution to this problem in the former's dictum that “only complexity can reduce complexity” (p. 67) – a version of Ross Ashby's Law of Requisite Variety, one of the foundational rules of first-order cybernetics. From this Luhmannian base, Qvortrup goes on to construct a fascinating presentation of “knowledge-based network morphologies”, where there is a clear “structural relationship between forms of knowledge and forms of network” (p. 77) and where knowledge is viewed as a complexity handling tool. Qvortrup in this sense is saying that although it might be possible to actually identify Castells' network categories in modern society, it is only through an appreciation of their deeper linkages with the forms of knowledge that one can begin to understand their relationship to societal complexity.

Although Luhmann's work (and therefore, by implication, the program of post-ontology) was heavily influenced by cyberneticians such as Ross Ashby, Norbert Wiener, Heinz von Foerster, Humberto Maturana, Francesco Varela and Gregory Bateson there is a further influence, from the field of mathematics, that is perhaps even more fundamental to its theoretical paradigm. George Spencer-Brown's *Laws of Form*, originally published in 1969, considers “an arithmetic whose geometry as yet has no numerical measure: and as astonishing as it may seem, the propositions of logic, as well as those of wider and more powerful applications, turn out to be wholly derivable from calculi so constructed” (from the preface to the 1979 edition, reprinted in *Laws of Form*, Portland: Cognizer Co., 1994). Dirk Baeker's brief essay on “Network Society” uses a Luhmannian interpretation of Spencer-Brown's work in order to construct a “possibilistic calculus of information and communication . . . consisting in distinctions being called and crossed, and defining forms which comprise the two sides of a distinction, the operation of the distinction, and the space brought about by the distinction being drawn” (p. 98). In the hands of Baeker, Spencer-Brown's calculus is used to present the ramifications of a reading of networks which understands them as “constituted by attempts to control by attributing identities to all elements involved” (p. 100). For those already familiar with the way in which Spencer-Brown's calculus has been integrated into the theory of second-order cybernetics, the resulting analysis represents an elegant teasing out of the inherent distinction-making that creates any network and any society. For those less used to such applications, Baeker's piece will provide a stimulating insight into the possibilities of a thriving (if still marginal) approach to communication and social theory as well as a demonstration that contemporary academic engagements with the *Laws of Form* are in no way the isolated preserve of Luhmann.

The final chapter of the book, coming after Lehmann's already discussed investigation into the work of art as network, is Jean Clam's “What Does It Imply to Operate on the Basis of Difference instead of Identity? Towards a Post-ontological Theory of Society”. This essay engages with those “self-engulfing terms” (such as 'society' and 'science') that have what Clam calls “Gödelising effects” on each other (in a reference to the mathematical research of Kurt Gödel, and which he glosses as “paradoxical entanglement”). Clam also introduces Spencer-Brown's calculus which he combines with an understanding of Lacan's 'mathemes' in order to expound upon a “strictly de-ontologizing” “use of the dividing mark” (p. 195) in a fraction of denomination. Unfortunately, I must admit to only a weak grasp of what Clam is laying forth here. In my defense, I would claim that my understanding is challenged by passages such as the following: “Denomination has to be revealed as the basic operation of any meaning projection, its main potentiality being to denominate denominators in gliding operation whose actual effectuation is a sort of absolute present that cannot be relativised” (p. 196). Indeed, Clam's essay is perhaps the victim of some seriously lax copy editing that might be contributing more than its fair share of noise to the message stream. I mark this as a serious possibility because the one real problem I have with the book as a whole is the amount of basic spelling and copy errors that can only be the result of inattentiveness in the publishing process. These errors are certainly of highest density in Clam's contribution but are also scattered across the rest of the collection. Clam's reputation in the French- and German-speaking social sciences is very high and it is a shame that one of his few pieces available to an English-speaking audience appears to be beset by such aids to confusion.

Copy editing aside, however, this collection of essays is a gem. It provides a rich, enthusiastically-argued antidote to the platitudes so often accompanying a scholarly familiarity with Castells' conception of a 'network society' and sets the scene, I hope, for further substantiation of the post-ontological paradigm. The essays here demonstrate that Luhmann's work is being carried on in a serious, rigorous but also flexible manner (in Europe, at least) and that the fields of communication theory and social theory are all the richer for it.

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