

Niklas  
Luhmann

THE NEW  
BOSS

## The New Boss



# The New Boss

Niklas Luhmann

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## Foreword: “Same as the Old Boss?”

Niklas Luhmann Observes Changes in  
Management

*Andreas Hess*

Niklas Luhmann was particularly interested in the phenomenon of the new boss and, with his (seldom “her”) arrival, the turbulences, tensions, and possible disquietude that result from a change in management. It’s an experience that anybody who has ever worked for a larger organization or bureaucratic structure can identify with and will have encountered; and we are not just talking about the very top of a firm’s or state’s hierarchy, but also further down at the local branch or office. The new arrival potentially threatens the routine and “business as usual,” and may have the capacity to destabilize the equilibrium of the organization. In response, management

and employees have to rethink their attitudes, assumptions, practices, and work patterns or procedures, and often to adjust their performance and interaction accordingly.

"So what?" one may say: What exactly is so extraordinary about such change? Isn't that just normal procedure? The answer to those questions is that it is exactly the normality in which change occurs that Luhmann's text catches so well. It is the moment of arrival, the first few weeks of doubt, insecurity, and the creeping feeling that change is in the air; sentiments best expressed perhaps in a variation on a line from a classic rock song, but with the famous line no longer a lament or an expression of frustration but rather ending with a question mark that symbolizes doubt over the imminent future: "Will the new boss be the same as the old boss? Or, maybe, will he not?"

What happens next in such a situation? Both hope and doubt seem to be held in suspense for some time and, as the sociological observer tentatively suggests, they are perhaps necessary for any larger institution to motivate people and continue to function. In other words, new energy input is inserted into the system without bringing the system to a halt. In this crucial period,

power relations are usually questioned and what is needed is a kind of polite behavior – Luhmann uses the German term *Takt* (tact, or sometimes tactfulness) again and again – to get over this difficult period for all at the office.

At this stage the reader might wonder: First, do Luhmann's observations have any weight in the world, and if so why? Second, why bother particularly with an early text when Luhmann's more comprehensive writings are available?

In the German-speaking world Niklas Luhmann has long assumed the status of a sociological classic. For those readers not familiar with intellectual life in Germany, it is perhaps worthwhile pointing out here that Luhmann and his work have become part and parcel of that peculiar phenomenon called *Suhrkamp Kultur* (named after the famous German publisher), a fact or status which refers to something more than just having a publisher. It means also a good chance of framing public discussion, steering it in a certain direction, or embracing a specialized way of thinking – even though a sociological text might not find as many readers or sell as well as literary bestsellers. It helps perhaps that the German-speaking academic environment still includes an

extensive network that has trust in, and pursues the ambitious project of, a comprehensive theory of society. In this context, Luhmann's writings have always attracted attention far beyond sociological circles. Some of this might have to do with the strong phenomenological descriptions he provides, which furnish another view of the world, a view less burdened with normative and/or moral assumptions.

Other countries and audiences, most notably Italy, Spain, and Brazil (and beyond Brazil some other Latin American countries as well), have also been receptive to Luhmann's work, maybe for the very reason that its observational qualities have potentially universal appeal (more about this further down). When looking at Luhmann's reception in the English-speaking world, things get a bit more complicated. The US has been exposed to Talcott Parsons's structural functionalism for a long time, with the result that the contemporary environment hasn't been very conducive to systems theory, whatever its provenance. To many American social scientists such attempts look increasingly like the return of the specter that threatened to haunt their now more empirically oriented sociology departments.

Only since the early 2000s have Luhmann's writings made some headway in the US, and even today such a reception remains a somewhat exotic undertaking. In the UK, the appreciation of Luhmann's work hasn't been straightforward either; after all, this is an academic environment that hasn't exactly been known for its love of grand theory, never mind systems theory. But even here Luhmann's systems theory has made inroads, though to date this has primarily been in the more empirically oriented areas of law, legal matters, state power, legitimacy, and procedures. Again, this success may be due to the sharp and witty distinctions he makes.

Despite such differing degrees of appreciation, it is fair to say that at present Luhmann's work seems to be acknowledged and represented on a truly global scale. His work has been translated into more than twenty languages – with no end in sight: after the publication of his major writings, such as *Social Systems* and the two-volume magnum opus *Theory of Society*, there is still demand for more. Earlier writings in particular seem to be of great interest.

Some of the attraction that these earlier writing, hold for the reader can be explained by the

fact that the later Luhmann would sometimes return to previous themes or interests and elaborate on them; the examples of intimacy/love and power immediately come to mind. Additionally, these texts often have their own unique charm, since their distinctions and phenomenological descriptions are richer in detail than many of the sociologist's later writings. Often, such discoveries not only would speak to admirers but could gain traction with other readers simply because the sociologist's distinctive way of observing others' observations (to use a Luhmannian formulation) frequently challenged traditional views and led others to see common or routine actions and experiences in a different, often new light. I suspect that this holds true also for *The New Boss*.

Without reducing theory entirely to individual experience, *The New Boss* is clearly the result of Luhmann's time spent in the environment he describes. He worked as a lawyer in the state apparatus of the German federal system – to be precise, as a civil servant for the *Land* of Lower Saxony, between 1954 and 1962 – an experience that allowed him to gain insight into the functioning of larger institutions and to identify certain patterns and features representative of

such administrative offices. The texts collected in this volume stem from the period soon after he left this job, from 1962 and 1965 respectively. The first two texts first appeared in a specialized German journal that discusses developments and trends in administration; the third text was an (undated and unpublished) talk that, given the context, must have been written in the same period.

What makes Luhmann's observations a sociological treat is that they allow us to consider the subtle yet sometimes critical moments of institutional change, particularly as they touch on such decisive issues as power relations, psychological predispositions, and related behavioral patterns. It is mainly through what Luhmann calls *tact* that major tensions do not get out of hand or can be avoided. As Luhmann further shows, playing on hope, fear, and doubt, adjustment and fine-tuning become crucial to the performance, routine, and functioning of every larger institutional framework; they are vital to both management and employee. In short, they are what gives life to the social organism that is the institution.

Luhmann's early study reveals the secret of