

University of Groningen

Book Review: The New Boss

Teekens, Thomas

Published in:
Cultural Sociology

DOI:
[10.1177/1749975520922167](https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975520922167)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2020

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Teekens, T. (2020). Book Review: The New Boss. *Cultural Sociology*, 14(2), 205-207.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975520922167>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

moral heart of the civil sphere. Societalization begins when the discursive and material machinery of the civil sphere are brought to bear on and scrutinize the motives and actions of actors within particular spheres. Struggles over meaning ensue as claim makers actively seek to (re-)present the threat posed to all, by the normative transgressions of the few. A key concept here is ‘code switch’. Echoing Kuhn’s notion of ‘paradigm shift’, code switch denotes a moment of ‘semiotic transformation’. Once the ‘coding’ of problems has ‘switched’, the interpretative frames through which they are grasped are fundamentally transformed. Reconceived as immanent threats to sacred social values, explosive social scandals begin to erupt, agents from the civil sphere can justifiably intervene, justice is meted out, and reparation and reform can begin.

Throughout the book, Alexander emphasizes the contingent nature of social crisis. Strains and problems are endemic to all social spheres but not all strains and problems are elevated to the level of full-blown crisis. Agents from the civil sphere have to work hard to achieve societalization. Even then, the likelihood is they will fail in their attempts to do so. Powerful collective emotions and moral outrage are necessary but not sufficient conditions for the realization of crisis states. Crisis only occurs if the problems within a given sphere are (re-)coded and (re-)presented as direct assaults to the sacred values of the civil sphere. In this regard, Chapter 7 is highly instructive. Herein, Alexander uses the example of the #MeToo movement to explore how and why particular social structural factors e.g. social marginalization, polarization etc. work to hinder, or ultimately block, societalization.

Read on its own terms, this is a very clearly written and highly insightful book. Situated within the context of Alexander’s wider intellectual project, it comprises one more case in the indictment against orthodox forms of social theory and theorizing. And while the conclusion of the book provides a powerful critique of existing accounts of crisis states, it provides very few clues as to how the work of thinkers from Blumer to Bourdieu via Luhmann, might be used to contribute to the ‘new social theory’ envisaged by Alexander. In this sense, the book poses as many problems as it solves. To date, Alexander’s services to social theory and the sociological reconstruction of culture are impressive. The challenge confronting social theorists and cultural sociologists alike is to find ways to integrate the most insightful thinkers and theories from the past into Alexander’s cultural sociological vision for the future.

Niklas Luhmann

The New Boss

Polity Press, Cambridge, 2018, £9.99 (ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-1787-9), 120 pp.

Reviewed by: Thomas Teekens, *University of Groningen/ICS/SCOOP, the Netherlands*

The New Boss is not a new book. While the title could reasonably lead one to expect to open a treatise on a new fancy management style, a glance at its author, the renowned German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1927–1998), indicates this is a booklet on sociological theory. What is new, then, about this book? *The New Boss* contains a newly translated collection of three essays written by Niklas Luhmann at an early point in his career: the first, the

eponymous essay 'The New Boss' from 1962; second, a chapter titled 'The Spontaneous Creation of Order', originally published in German in 1965; and the third, a previously unpublished typescript with the remarkable title 'Subtersion, or the Art of Directing Superiors', which was (intended as) a lecture by Luhmann during the early 1960s.

Before describing the contents, it seems wise to place these essays in perspective of Luhmann's prolific career. Today, Luhmann is well known for his explication of systems-theory, detailed in *Social Systems* (1984) and his two-volume magnum opus *Theory of Society* (1997). Both books originated after Luhmann's 'autopoietic turn' in the 1980s, differentiating his early and late work (see Seidl and Becker, 2006). Significantly, the essays in *The New Boss* are among the earliest of the early-career work of Luhmann, containing thoughts and observations of an academic whose scholarly career had just begun. While Luhmann's systems-theoretical work clearly differentiates from Talcott Parsons later on (partly explaining why, in the USA, Luhmann never reached the level of fame he enjoyed in German-speaking countries), here, his writings are still heavily inspired by meeting Parsons, the 'other' systems-theorist, in 1961.

Luhmann's first essay deals with a situation familiar to many: the introduction of a new boss in the workplace. With wit and clarity, Luhmann illustrates how, inevitably, informal social rules clash with the formal decision-making that bureaucracies demand. In functionalist language, Luhmann describes how individuals assume roles that are somewhat alien, and how either bottom-up learning or top-down management can meddle in the informal relations which structure workplace social life. He ends by advocating research into how informal and formal structures and roles correlate to create more appropriate ways of governance within organizations.

The second essay, 'The Spontaneous Creation of Order', systematically outlines theoretical reasons why the differentiation between formal decision-making and informal relations is inevitable for any bureaucratic system. Generally, Luhmann argues that an individual cannot be their complete self in a formal organization. This leads to an unavoidable moment of social repercussion: trying to minimize the effects of 'spontaneous action', an individual searches for interpersonal relations and situations. Such relations group together, creating in-groups and out-groups, which either reinforce themselves or resolve into other informal groups. Here is an early example of Luhmann's systems-theory, in which both individual action and context create, perpetuate and alter the system in which the action occurs.

The final essay, an unknown lecture to be delivered by Luhmann, deals with the art of 'managing up'. Musing on what organizational sociology can teach us about how to direct our supervisors, Luhmann argues that power occurs in cooperation, rather than conflict, and this leads to leeway for the subordinate. The key, for Luhmann, is tact, that is to say, making sure one understands the roles and expectations in a situation and, consequently, understanding how to attain situational advantages.

The cultural sociologist may question the relevance of a half-century-old German treatise on organizational culture. Surely an easy criticism of the text is its out-of-date focus on male, White, public administration work floors of the 1950s. In the book's foreword, Andreas Hess (to readers here, perhaps best-known for his work on gastronomic societies in the Basque countries published in *Cultural Sociology* in 2007) elegantly side-steps these criticisms for Luhmann. He admits, the essays are no longer

empirically avant-garde, but rather theoretically relevant for the insight Luhmann offers in capturing and analysing 'normal situations'. The perceptive, easily accessible and at times tongue-in-cheek way in which Luhmann presents his sociological arguments make this book worthwhile. At just over a hundred pages, the text remarkably weaves empirical acumen and theoretical insight, without becoming too heavy. This may not be Luhmann's most important work, but occasionally, less lofty work also sparks the sociological imagination.

References

- Hess A (2007) The social bonds of cooking: Gastronomic societies in the Basque Country. *Cultural Sociology* 1(3): 383–407.
- Luhmann N (1984) *Soziale Systeme*. Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag GmbH.
- Luhmann N (1997) *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*. Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag GmbH.
- Seidl D and Becker KH (eds) (2006) *Niklas Luhmann and Organization Studies*. Frederiksberg: CBS Press.