

Thomas Luckmann dies aged 88

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Thomas Luckmann was born in 1927 in the Slovenian town of Jesenice, than soon after became a part of the Yugoslavian Kingdom. Growing up bilingually at the Slovenian-Austrian boarder he received a broad humanist education. After WWII, Luckmann moved to Vienna where he first finished school and then studied linguistics and philosophy. He later moved to Innsbruck to study psychology, egyptology, French philology, and history. Right after marrying in 1950, first his wife Benita Luckmann and then 1951 Thomas came to New York, destitute, where he first worked as chauffeur for a known lawyer and as builder on his property, and his wife as steno typist at the Wall Street, then continuing their studies in philosophy and sociology at the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research. Here, some of Luckmann's teachers were Alfred Schütz, Karl Löwith, Carl Mayer (through whom he later met Arnold Gehlen), and here as a student he met with Peter L. Berger. In 1951, the young couple had a first of later three daughters (Maja, Mara, Metka), attending lectures after five, in shifts, and learning during late evening (Schnettler 2006).

After completing his studies, Luckmann first taught at Hobart College, New York, before returning to the New School for Social Research as successor of his teacher Alfred Schütz, with Peter L. Berger as colleague, from 1962-3 as colleague and friend also of Helmuth Plessner's. In 1965 he returned to Germany where he received a call to a chair at University of Frankfurt am Main. In 1970, Luckmann became Professor for Sociology at University of Constance where he stayed until his retirement in 1994.

The richness and influence of Luckmann's oeuvre can be ascribed to its grounding in a range of sociological, anthropological, and philosophical traditions with a deep cultural-historical understanding. Luckmann combines the phenomenological thinking of Edmund Husserl and Alfred Schütz, Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge and the anthropologies of Arnold Gehlen and Helmuth Plessner as well as the American pragmatists George Herbert Mead, William James, and John Dewey, and the later developing sociological perspectives of symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology.

Luckmann probably best-known book is "The Social Construction of Reality—A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge" (1966) that he wrote together with Peter L. Berger ... although, as he once put it, Luckmann and Berger actually wrote it "four-headed", "because we both discussed what we were doing with our wives, who were scholars in their own right" (Dreher 2014). The influence of this book is enormous, if not, in some areas, pervasive, yet hard to quantify. It has been translated in many languages. Ideas and phrases ("the social construction of ...") have been trivialised through more or less thoughtful use—often a sign for impact far beyond narrow academic circles. Importantly, many authors have build explicitly on it since it was first published half a century ago; nonetheless many authors developed their own successful theoretical or empirical approaches with less explicit reference to it, in continuation of or in demarcation from it.

The book can be read, although not directly meant as a fundamental critique of (structural) functionalist reason. It also treats psychoanalysis with a little bit of irony. At the core, it amalgamates the sociologies of Emil Durkheim with Max Weber in the famous lead question: "How is it possible that human activity (*Handeln*) should produce a world of things (*choses*)?" (Berger & Luckmann 1966: 18). The 'Social Construction' provides a broad, not really

specific theory that can and has been used as a set of general heuristics for grasping the historicity of what counts as real and relevant in a world shared by fellow humans, full also of things and non-humans, mainly focussing on their meaningful interactions. The book is deeply anthropological by recognising the importance of the body and the organism, of social things and their histories. Although often used as theoretical reference, it develops its great strengths especially when empirically studying all kinds of specific interactions and communications (in case of Luckmann himself: communicative genres as institutionalised routines, moral communication in particular). Its charm and actuality emerges from permanently urging the researcher to account both for the given structures and the actually just occurring interactions that make the world to what it is in that moment for those involved and later for those taking notice of how it was so far seen as real and normal.

Of enormous importance for the development of various contemporary discussions in sociology is the book “The Structures of the Life-World” (1974) that Luckmann developed from the notes and documents bequeathed unfinished by Alfred Schütz after his premature death in 1959. The Structures of the Life-World” have become a classic sociological text that provides the basis for sociological phenomenology and recent developments in the sociology of knowledge. In the book, Luckmann (and Schütz) unfold a theory to inform social theory, a conception of how a person’s life-world is constituted by individually and intersubjectively inhabiting a world of unquestioned everyday character.

A particular interest of Luckmann’s research has always been the role of religion in modern societies. Whilst Max Weber had highlighted the secularisation of society, Luckmann showed already in the 1960s how religion features in modern societies by virtue of a transformation of symbols. In 1967, he published the book ‘The Invisible Religion’ with a very broad notion of religiosity that can literally encompass everything, thereby allowing for discovering new or different forms of religiosity, less or not at all associated with an officially registered religious community. He distinguished small (within the everyday), middle-range (only indirect), and great (far beyond everyday reality reaching) transcendences. His theory of signs, symbols, and rituals is a logical and fruitful further elaboration of his effort to trace transcendences into all corners of social life. His analyses have provided the basis for the emergence of discussions about “popular religion” and “intermediary institutions”.

His studies into genres in (oral) communication laid the foundation for the emergence of the sociology of language and communication. In this area, his best-known work explores the “Communicative Construction of Moral” (with Jörg Bergmann, 1999). The recent emergence of “communicative constructivism” as a new strand of theory and research pays testimony to the sustained impact of Luckmann’s work to the present day (Knoblauch 2013). Throughout his career Luckmann published in multiple languages and taught in different parts of the world making him a truly transcultural social theorist (Schnettler 2006). His work therefore was received well not only in Europe but also elsewhere in the world. Moreover, the influence of his work ripples through the social sciences and reaches also into the information sciences (e.g. Martin et al. 2012: 1192; Luckmann 2005).

Luckmann has questioned taken-for-granted assumptions about the equation of what is social and is human. From cultural anthropology and history he follows that what counts as social can be very different and changing. He always emphasised, often with a dry sense of humour, that he would stand for a “realist” position, especially when reminding so-called “constructivists” or “constructionists” of how much the materiality of things matters and which manifold roles it can play in the various social formations und dominating definitions of a ‘social world’ (Luckmann 1980). Scientific knowledge is seen in relation to everyday common sense

knowledge as special knowledge. Science, in his view, different than religion, has failed to offer meaning to last questions because it is falsifiable in principle, never able to claim ultimate truths and has therefore run into its 'cosmological fiasco' of never having found the Archimedean point from which both world and reality could be explained as well as this explanation could be explained itself (Luckmann 1999, 1973).

Thomas Luckmann remained active in German and international sociology and in conversation with many neighbouring disciplines until very recently. On Tuesday, 10 May, he has died after a long illness in his mountain home in Carinthia, Austria (not far from the Slovenian boarder).

Sources

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