

## Understanding Social Systems?

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**> Upshot** • In my commentary I reflect on conceptual and epistemological questions. In particular, I challenge the idea of trying to define social systems. I also wonder whether in many cases autopoiesis is carelessly used as a mere synonym for self-organization.

« 1 » Hugo Urrestarazu's article is very interesting and very well thought through. Therefore, I shall not reflect on its contents directly. Rather, I only wish to ask some conceptual and epistemological questions that arose in me as I was reading it.

« 2 » Some 25 years ago, Niklas Luhmann invited me to visit him in Bielefeld to talk about his view of social systems as autopoietic systems of communication. I asked him then: "Why do you want to leave human beings out of your considerations about the fundamental constitution of social systems?" His answer was: "I want to make a theory of social systems that would permit me to treat them in formal terms so that I may compute what may happen with them. Since human beings are unpredictable, they cannot be part of it." He invited me to participate with him in the seminar that he used to give on Wednesdays evenings. We did this for several weeks and had a great time reflecting on theories, formalisms and many aspects of human existence. Yet, I remained with the question: "What aspects of our daily living do we want to evoke when we use the word 'social' or speak of 'social systems' and about which we may wish to expand our understanding by asking if social systems are autopoietic systems?"

« 3 » We human beings, as all living systems do, live as valid whatever experience that we live in the moment that we live it, and act accordingly: our living follows the path that arises with what we live as valid. At the same time, we human beings (as all living systems do in the flow of their living) do not know whether an experience that we live as valid in the moment that we live it is one that we shall continue to accept as valid in relation to further experi-

ences that we choose not to doubt: we do not know whether we shall validate the first experience as a perception or invalidate it as a mistake-illusion, according to whether we think that the second experience confirms or contradicts it. That is, we do not know in the moment that we experience something whether we are experiencing a perception or an illusion. And this is not a limitation or a failure of the operation of our nervous system, and this does not mean that we living beings are fallible, but it is our condition of biological existence as structure-determined systems; instruments are the same.

« 4 » As I accept as valid what I have just said, I act under the understanding that whenever we make a distinction that appears in our living is an operational entity together with its domain of existence as a totality that arises as an operational-conceptual abstractions of what is happening in our living with features specified by what we do as we distinguish what we distinguish, and not as some preexisting entity with features that are not determine by what we do in our distinction of it. As we human beings live our daily living in the coherences that arise as we do what we do as biological beings, we trust the domains of sensory, operational and relational coherences that arise with our distinction to be aspects of the realization of our living. And we do so reflecting on them and correcting our errors or mistake as we find them as we live our living as languaging beings. As we live in this manner, we put names to what we distinguish, but since we do not distinguish independent entities, but distinguish sensory-effectors configuration in our living, what we name are sensory-effectors configurations that pertain to the coherences of our living. Accordingly, that which we call *social system* is necessarily an aspect of the coherences of the our daily living. Therefore when we want to understand the system that we call *social system*, what we want to do is to abstract the configuration of sensory-operational-relational coherences of our daily living that we wish to evoke under that name, not something alien to our daily life that we may define in some arbitrary way.

« 5 » Our nervous system operates abstracting configurations of relations and configurations of configurations of rela-

tions of sensory-operational-relational coherences that happen in the realization of our living in our sensory-operational surfaces. So my question would be: "What configuration of sensory-operational-relational coherences am I abstracting when I name *social system* some particular aspect of the realization of my relational living?" Or in other words, what sensory-operational-relational configuration of my relational living am I calling *social system*? The expression *social system* arises historically in the course of conversations about our human relational living, in an attempt to visualize some regularities that occurred in it, thinking that if we could grasp them we would be able to solve some difficulties that we were encountering in our living together, thinking that we could do so through formalizing them with some adequate theory that we would invent. But to do that, we have to abstract those regularities in our living together first; and to do that, we must respect ourselves accepting that naming is not a trivial aspect of what we do in our living: names have arisen in our history of living together as operational elements of coordination of our doings, and reveal regularities in that living. In these circumstances, if I want to understand how we do what we do I would begin by asking: "What configurations of sensory-operational-relations are realized and conserved in that aspect of the flow of our living that we call social relations, and that prompt us to speak of *social systems* when we see them occurring in some community of living beings? But, this is what Urrestarazu does when talking about autopoiesis. So I do not fully understand, unless this is a philosophical habit, why he proposes a *definition* of *social systems* instead of asking himself what configuration of sensory-operational-relational coherences we connote when in daily life we speak of social relations... and social systems. By the way, when I say that living systems are molecular autopoietic systems, I am not making a definition. Rather, I am making an abstraction of the configuration of processes that constitute living systems as autonomous molecular systems that exist as discrete sensory-operational-relational entities in integration with their ecological niche as this arises with them.

« 6 » In the Matriztic School, my colleague Ximena Dávila Yáñez<sup>1</sup> and I think that much confusion has arisen with the not very careful use of the notion of *autopoiesis*, particularly as it is treated almost as if it were a synonym of self-organization. This is not the case with Urrestarazu's article, and I congratulate him for his care in being impeccable in this matter. Yet I would also like to add that Dávila and I want to emphasize that as living systems exist as *molecular autopoietic systems*, they occur in unity with the *ecological niche* that arises with them, and exist as *ecological organism-niche unities* as they operate as totalities.

« 7 » Although we do not usually see it in this way, we live immersed, so to say, in a flowing dynamic network of changing sensations in which from the moment we are conceived, we learned to abstract the sensory configurations that begin to guide the course of our living according to the manner of living that we learn-generate-create as we live. And in this network of sensations, what we distinguish is brought to existence as we distinguish it with what we do and name, much as a child in a sandy humid beach brings forth stars, triangles, flowers ... with the moulds that he or she may happen to be playing with. So, names and words in general are not trivial artifices for indicating pre-existing conceptual or physical entities, they connote what we do and feel as we use them. Without our always being aware of what we are doing, names and, in fact, all words that we use, constantly orient our sensory-operational-relational living, both illuminating and obscuring it, according to the emotions that they evoke in us.

« 8 » Thus, in depth my question to Luhmann was: What would be conserved with the word *social* if we were to accept that *social systems are autopoietic systems*? Or, what would be lost from the psychic relational space of our daily living if we accept the claim that *social systems are autopoietic systems of communications*? After we give

1 | I mention my colleague because it is in our work together in the Matriztic School that we have reflected on these matters and find that we have to emphasize that living systems are molecular autopoietic systems, and that as such, they exist as totalities as organism-niche integrated ecological unities.

a name to something that we distinguish in our domain of living, whenever we later pronounce that name we bring forth into our present that something and the sensory-operational-relational domain that we are generating through it in our living.

« 9 » What would be added to our understanding of *social systems* and to how we now live our daily living if we were to find that that which we usually call a social system is an *autopoietic system*, besides the desire of getting out of *social systems* to avoid becoming robots that can only exist in them if all that they do is subordinated to their conservation, as Urrestarazu shows in his article? Maybe what is added is the awareness that if we are able to realize when a *social system* is about to become an *autopoietic system*, we can be wise enough to choose to live in such a way that it never occurs because we would know that whether that happens or not it would depend on us. I think that democracy is one attempt to live in that awareness so that we can avoid the temptation of the promised perfection of fundamentalist doctrines or theories that deny the possibility of reflecting about their fundamentals in order to have the freedom of abandoning them.

« 10 » These were the reflections that I wanted to make, in addition to thanking Urrestarazu for his friendly reference to me. Thank you!

**Humberto Maturana Romesín** received a Ph.D. in Biology from Harvard University. He showed that living beings are molecular autopoietic systems, and that if one follows the consequences of the fact that living beings do not distinguish in their experience between perception and illusion, one can show that: language as a biological phenomenon occurs as a flow of living together in coordinations of coordinations of consensual behaviors; and cognition as a biological phenomenon occurs when an organism operates adequately to the circumstances of its living, conserving its autopoiesis as a consequence of the operational-relational coherences with its niche that are proper to it in the present of its living as a feature of the history of evolutionary structural drift to which it belongs.

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## Author's Response From Humans to Human Social Systems

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> **Upshot** • Reflecting beyond the original intent of my paper, I respond to Luhmann-inspired commentaries by raising ontological-epistemological issues that stand before any attempt to build bridges between Maturana's and Luhmann's approaches to "autopoiesis." I propose to look at the social from a vantage point from which human actors and their social doings (communications, among others) appear as equally relevant objects of knowledge in sociological theory-building.

« 1 » I would like to express my gratification upon receiving so many discerning commentaries to my target article. Many of them address subjects that are well beyond the initial scope and intent of my paper, while being nonetheless highly relevant. This finding leads me to remind readers of my original aim in order to explain some seeming shortcomings (as noted by certain contributors). In addition, I shall provide further developments concerning some implications of this work that I did not envisage developing in the paper for reasons of keeping the overall focus as tight as possible.

« 2 » I will first address generally the mentioned limitations in the light of my original goals, and then, when I deal with the debate on the hypothetical "autopoieticity" of social systems, respond to the more challenging suggestions and opposing opinions provoked by my approach.

### The goals of the target article

« 3 » The prime objective throughout my three preceding papers (Urrestarazu, 2011a, 2011b, 2012) was to provide a *thorough explanation* of the concept of autopoiesis, as it was originally proposed by Humberto Maturana and later worked out with the contribution of Francisco Varela and other collaborators. The need for such an explanatory effort appeared to me to be