



Research Committee 51
on Sociocybernetics
ISA International Sociological Association

ISSUE NO.43 APRIL 2023

RC51 *Newsletter*

EDITORS: Toru Takahashi, Andrew Mitchell
rc51newsletter@sociocybernetics.org

CONTENTS:

Editors' Introduction	<i>Toru Takahashi and Andrew Mitchell</i>	2
Memory of Loet Leydesdorff and his work	<i>Bernard Scott</i>	3
Announcements		
Call for papers to the Luhmann Conference 2023 on "Environments. Observed with social systems theory"	<i>Steffen Roth</i>	5
Journal of Sociocybernetics		6
Book review		
Jason Hickel, <i>Less is More: How Degrowth will Save the World</i>	<i>Bernd R. Hornung</i>	8

Editors' Introduction

Dear RC51 members,

This year we will hold the ISA World Congress in Melbourne. We are looking forward to seeing you on-site/online. We are going to have a dozen sessions in Melbourne, which range from theoretical considerations to various actual issues like politics, technology, community, and equality. The sociocybernetic community, as well as those in other research fields, have gone through a winter of face-to-face communication due to the pandemic. Now we have difficulties caused by recent inflation affecting the cost of all things globally. But we still hope this year's sessions will be a real reboot for the community.

Last month, we received sad news that a distinguished sociocybernetician, Loet Leydesdorff passed away in Amsterdam. Bernard Scott, a Loet's friend, kindly wrote an article about his memory and the sociocybernetician's work for us.

Bernd R. Hornung contributed his book review of Jason Hickel's *Less is More: How Degrowth will Save the World*. Building a sustainable society is an acute and long-term challenge to us. Bernd has been sharing his book reviews and seminar report related to the Degrowth research project and alternative society through the newsletter.

The Journal of Sociocybernetics launched a new issue in October 2022, containing two articles. The abstracts and links can be found in the newsletter.

We also have a call for papers to the Luhmann Conference 2023 from Steffen Roth. The Luhmann Conference (<https://luhmannconference.com/>), which has been held in Dubrovnik, offers an active international platform for reconsidering and applying Niklas Luhmann's work in our current context.

See you soon!

Toru Takahashi and Andrew Mitchell

RC51 Newsletter Editors

rc51newsletter@sociocybernetics.org

Obituary for Loet Leydesdorff, Sociocybernetician

(b. in Batavia, Dutch East Indies, August 21, 1948, d. Amsterdam, March 11, 2023)

I am sad to report the death of scientist sociocybernetician, Loet Leydesdorff. Loet was not a regular attendee of RC 51 events, but was [good friends with a number of us](#). I recall meeting him at two ISA events in Durban and Toronto. I also met him at a meeting of the American Society for Cybernetics. We quickly became good friends. I felt honoured to get to know him. He was a scholar and gentleman, and a very accomplished scientist.

Loet Leydesdorff (Ph.D. Sociology, M.A. Philosophy, and M.Sc. Biochemistry) was Professor emeritus at the Amsterdam School of Communications Research (ASCoR) of the University of Amsterdam. He was Associate Faculty at the Science and Technology Policy Research Unit (SPRU) of the University of Sussex, Visiting Professor of the Institute of Scientific and Technical Information of China (ISTIC) in Beijing, Guest Professor at Zhejiang University in Hangzhou, and Visiting Fellow at the School of Management, Birkbeck, University of London. He published extensively in systems theory, social network analysis, scientometrics, and the sociology of innovation (see: <http://www.leydesdorff.net/list.htm> or <http://scholar.google.com/citations?user=yeh9gNYAAAAJ&hl=en>).

With Henry Etzkowitz, Loet initiated a series of workshops, conferences, and special issues about the [Triple Helix of University-Industry-Government Relations](#). He received the Derek de Solla Price Award for Scientometrics and Informetrics in 2003 and held “The City of Lausanne” Honor Chair at the School of Economics, Université de Lausanne, in 2005. In 2007, he was Vice-President of the 8th International Conference on Computing Anticipatory Systems (CASYS’07, Liège).

[Research.com](#), a prominent academic platform for scientists, in the 2022 Edition of their Ranking of Top 1000 Scientists in the area of Social Sciences and Humanities list, Loet as ranked #34 in the world ranking and [you are he is](#) also listed #3 in Netherlands. The full world ranking is here: <https://research.com/scientists-rankings/social-sciences-and-humanities>. The entire ranking for the Netherlands is here: <https://research.com/scientists-rankings/social-sciences-and-humanities/nl>

Loet’s last book, *The Evolutionary Dynamics of Discursive Knowledge: Communication-Theoretical Perspectives on an Empirical Philosophy of Science* (2021), is available here as an open access download: <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-59951-5>

The publishers say the book:

- Provides a thorough introduction to the relations among relevant theories (systems theory, evolution theory, and communication theory) and therefore serves interdisciplinarity
- Elaborates the institutional Triple Helix of university-industry-government into a neo-evolutionary one explaining the potential for synergy in TH relations
- Bridges the gap between qualitative theorizing about the dynamics of science and quantitative studies in science, technology, and innovation
- Is written by an author who is a well-known scientometrician and a highly cited researcher.

More about Loet’s life and work can be found here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loet_Leydesdorff and here: <http://www.leydesdorff.net/>

Bernard Scott 22/03/2023

Call for papers to the Luhmann Conference 2023 on "Environments Observed with Social Systems Theory"

Venue: Inter-University Centre (IUC), Dubrovnik, Croatia

Address: Don Frana Bulić 4, 20000 Dubrovnik, Croatia

Dates: 12-15 September 2023

Pre-conference dinner: 11 September 2023

Theme

Commonly associated with nature or ecology, the concept of environment is foundational to social systems theory. A “system is the difference between system and environment” (Luhmann, 2006), and we define as autopoietic those systems capable of maintaining the boundary between themselves and their environment. This definition applies not only to living, but also to psychic and social systems, with each of the manifold systems creating its own environment. In social systems theory, there is hence no such thing as the environment, if by this generalised environment we understand an all-encompassing ecosystem of which all living (and perhaps other autopoietic) systems are elements. Rather, there is an ineluctable plurality of environments, for there are at least as many environments as there are systems. This realisation also implies that environment may not be confused with nature, that is, the environmental concept of natural sciences and hence of only one branch of the broader function system of science, which itself is only one of the many social systems each operating (in) its own environment (Roth and Valentinov, 2020). Moreover, the proliferation of information and communications technology has expanded the concept in terms of new media or virtual environments (Taekke, 2017).

The environmentally pluralistic perspective of social systems theory, however, is in sharp contrast to the swelling sematic reservoir (Andersen, 2010; Neisig, 2021) of what Luhmann (1989) referred to as “ecological communication”. The core ideas here imply that the environment in fact is nature, which is death-threatened by prevailing modes of human production and reproduction. Human economies and other social systems, therefore, require a major make-over ...

Read the full CFP here: <https://wp.me/pvO07-1J7>

Selected papers submitted to the Luhmann Conference 2023 will be invited for submission to a dedicated special issue of Systems Research and Behavioral Science [SSCI 1.966, Scopus, CABS**].

Journal of Sociocybernetics: New Issue

In October 2022 we launched a new issue of the Journal of Sociocybernetics. We wish to express our thanks to Jesper Tække and Philippos Nicolopoulos for their contributions.

You can find the abstract and paper links below.

As ever, we are always happy to accept any article related to sociocybernetics, so if you are interested in having your article published in the journal, please visit <https://papiro.unizar.es/ojs/index.php/rc51-jos/about/submissions> for more information.

Previous issues of the journal can be found here: <https://papiro.unizar.es/ojs/index.php/rc51-jos/issue/archive>

Yours,

The Journal of Sociocybernetics editing team

Journal of Sociocybernetics: Vol. 18 No. 1 (2022)

Algorithmic Differentiation of Society – a Luhmann Perspective on the Societal Impact of Digital Media

Jesper Tække

Aarhus University, Denmark

The aim of this article is to put forward Luhmann's theory of social differentiation as the way society as a social system has organized itself internally after it has differentiated itself out from its external environment. The question discussed is if we are facing a new form of differentiation triggered by digital media. To answer the question, the article puts forward Luhmann's theory and the historical forms of differentiation he described. After that the article shows how the triggering factor, in a non-deterministic way, for Luhmann is communication media. A new differentiation form emerges when the dynamic and complexity of society has increased to such an extent, i.e., other forms of differentiation have grown in latency, that a new form can take over. After the introduction to the theory and the interpretations of it, it is discussed if and how a new form of differentiation is under development. The discussion circles around how to interpret contemporary developments as signs of how the new differentiation form works. The article concludes that functional differentiation is surpassed by a new basic form of differentiation which is the algorithmic differentiation of society.

[Link to article](#)

Sustainable Touristic Development in Rural Areas: The Issue of Carrying Capacity, and Systems Theory

Philippos Nicolopoulos

Secretary of the Deanship and All Schools of the Literal Society of “Parnassos” Athens, Former Asst. Prof. of the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Crete and Former Assoc. Prof. of the University of Indianapolis, Athens Campus

The mass conventional tourism, mainly appeared in coastal areas of southern countries with mild weather and warm summer in the last 50-60 years, had negative impacts on the natural environment and on local cultures. This kind of tourism gave priority to the increase of economic profit of local societies “selling” natural advantages to people who liked summer vacation “relax”. On the contrary in the last years, exactly because of the aforementioned negative impacts, there exists a tendency for a sustainable touristic development, connected with the so-called alternative and qualitative tourism. This is another kind of tourism which intends to combine the meeting of the desires of tourists, the reinforcement of local and national economy of countries and the non-degradation of natural and cultural capital of the touristic areas. That’s why it began to turn to other activities which are more “qualitative” and to consider the protection of natural environment as an issue of first priority. From this point of view the rural areas, exactly, because many times are more “virgin” and “exciting” compared with the crowded coastal zones are preferable.

In the present article I propose how systems theory and sociocybernetics can contribute to the sustainable development of this kind, based on an “intelligent” control system which applies their principles and their perspective.

[Link to article](#)

Book Review

Jason Hickel:

LESS IS MORE, HOW DEGROWTH WILL SAVE THE WORLD

William Heinemann, London 2020 (German Edition 2022)

By Bernd R. Hornung

This is one of the books in my category of “most urgent reading”, but also in the category of “nonstop reading”, which contains considerably less books than “most urgent reading”. I consider it one of the most important key works in the field of climate change and ecological crisis.

The title “Less is More” may lead a bit astray, because the author enters into the discussion of how to resolve the current problems of climate and ecology by “less” only at page 193 out of 328 pages (of the German edition). But only a bit, because the great value of this book, apart from its excellent and highly interesting readability also for the non-specialist reader, lies in providing on those nearly 200 pages a concise but very complex and complete picture of the origin, development, current state, and deeper reasons for the current situation of pending – or rather beginning – ecological disaster. Climate change, after all, is only one of several interrelated big problems caused by human activity and the logic of unlimited economic growth and resource use. A logic which is inherent in capitalism and the dominant modern world view.

This leads up to a proposal of an alternative, sustainable form of economy – in which less is more. The reader who now expects a discussion of activities of saving, scarcity, and austerity of the individuals will be disappointed. Jason Hickel, of course, mentions individual behavior and lifestyle, but concentrates on the level of economy and society as social systems. He analyzes the systemic logic and processes of unlimited growth, extraction, exploitation of human and non-human resources, and the unnecessary affluence and waste which could be avoided by another type of economy. The author outlines how this could be achieved without reducing the well-being of the individuals. On the contrary, it could even improve it. These views go along with arguments presented time ago by Erich Fromm in his book “To Have or to Be?” and they also join with the ideas of the Degrowth movement, as, e.g., summarized by Giorgos Kallis in “Degrowth”. Another most urgent reading, by the way. All of the findings and arguments presented are, in my view, also perfectly in line and compatible with John Raven’s system-oriented book on “The New Wealth of Nations”.

In short, a description of the current problems is followed by an outline of the development of the current global capitalist system, which is based on the ideology of unlimited economic growth. This leads to a discussion of the main solutions proposed to resolve these problems. They range from “Green Growth” to geo-engineering and the decoupling of economic growth from the use of natural material (and immaterial) resources. Jason Hickel does not get tired pointing out that unlimited growth can be found nowhere in nature and is not possible for an economy, not even in a non-exponential way. But as data clearly show, we are far into exponential economic growth.

The great value of this book, in my view, lies in the coherence of all the aspects presented. These include the relation of economic development and growth with colonialism, the material exploitation in the wake of the peasant wars in Europe, the “enclosure” movement (which was not limited to the UK), and also the exploitation of women through badly paid and unpaid labor as well as the unpaid care maintaining their families. This means, after all, that in Hickel’s encompassing view feminism is integrated as well.

And so are religion and science. Both are described and analyzed in their roles of promoting and justifying capitalism. One, e.g., by declaring already in the bible the human being as the master of the earth, the other by providing the tools for mastering, managing, and exploiting the earth. Exploiting not only nature but human beings as well. However, Jason Hickel also presents their roles in pre-capitalist ways of living in harmony with nature and the world. He finally discusses the role of modern science in paving a way back to an ecologically compatible and sustainable way of life, although at a quite different level from the pre-capitalist way and without scarcity.

Some tendencies towards an ecologically sustainable society in harmony with nature and the planet can also be found in the more recent developments of religion in the rich countries of the Western World. This discussion reminds of the distinction of Capra and Luisi between religion and spirituality as discussed in “The Systems View of Life”. Unless I missed something, Jason Hickel does not mention the work of Capra and does not refer to such a distinction. However, with regard to his discussion of the Cartesian split between nature and humans on the one hand and the animistic unity of humans and nature on the other, this distinction might turn out very fruitful.

A key argument of Hickel is, that humans have to change their world view from being superior to nature and being its masters to being part of nature and being interdependent with it. After all, human life even depends on nature. Changing the world view, of course, is not sufficient. It has to be accompanied and followed by changes of action and changes of lifestyle.

The author does not present one big solution, but a package of a number of interrelated broad strategies at a somewhat general level. It is clearly a systemic approach and a view of how we can get to a sustainable (post-capitalist) society. But it is not a simple recipe nor a blueprint or a detailed scenario. This cannot be expected from a chapter of roughly fifty pages. It is, however, a broad outline of the direction in which to go. Each one of the strategies proposed is itself a complex issue backed by a whole body of scientific literature.

The fundamental problem identified by Jason Hickel is the modern world’s striving for endless and unlimited economic growth. A growth not to be found anywhere in nature. To reduce the effects of the panoply of ecological problems threatening the existence of humankind and to arrive at a sustainable society, it is necessary, the author argues, to drastically reduce the throughput of energy and material of the world economy.

To achieve this, he proposes a set of strategies, each one of them not new to environmentalists:

- End planned obsolescence and switch to use durable and repairable goods.
- Reduce publicity and product marketing, which more than often produces new needs for the new products artificially instead of responding to consumers’ real needs.
- Move from private property of seldom used goods to sharing and leasing them.
- Stop the waste of foodstuffs.
- Reduce environmentally detrimental industries.
- Reduce weekly working-time and provide state job guarantee by the state (another possibility would be an unconditional basic income as proposed by Rutger Bregman).
- Reduce income-inequality by suitably taxing extremely high incomes and property.
- Decommodify public goods and extend the “commons”.
- Establish a mechanism for waving unjust and unpayable debts.
- Reorganize the financial sector around a different kind of money – “real money” (also called “Sovereign Money” or “Positive Money”).

Moreover, a central condition for successfully implementing such strategies is for Hickel a genuine and viable democracy.

The last chapters contain a number of propositions how to implement such strategies to arrive at a

sustainable non-growth society, which nevertheless is plentiful. It is not at all “back to the caves” or “back to animism”. It is the outline of a possibility of well-being and plentifulness, although without affluence, waste, and poverty, recognizing and respecting that we humans are part of the big planetary web of life.

All of these observations and arguments are not just theories and speculations. All are based on carefully selected data from reliable sources and documented on many pages of references and annotations.

“Less is more”, like “Degrowth” by Kallis, is not explicitly a sociocybernetic or systems book and does not use such technical terminology. Implicitly, however, it is clearly sociocybernetic insisting on interrelatedness, nestedness, and a multiplicity of feedback loops everywhere. A key concept is the “web of life” which brings it close to the work of Capra and Luisi. It explicitly builds on the ideas of the degrowth movement, which are presented in a concise and rather complete way in Kallis’ “Degrowth”.

Maybe “Less is More” is so well readable precisely because the author avoids technical language as far as possible. He takes care to explain technical concepts where necessary and provides illustrative and informative examples from societies all around the globe.

Literature

CAPRA, Fritjof; LUISI, Pier Luigi: The Systems View of Life, A Unifying Vision, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (UK) 2019 [1/2014]

BREGMAN, Rutger: Utopia for Realists, And How We Can Get There, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, New York 2018 [1/2014 Dutch edition]

FROMM, Erich: To Have or to Be?, Harper & Row, New York, London 1976 [1/1976]

HICKEL, Jason: Less is More, How Degrowth Will Save the World, William Heinemann, London 2020

KALLIS, Giorgos: Degrowth, Agenda Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne 2018

POSITIVE MONEY Ltd, London: <https://positivemoney.org/our-proposals/sovereign-money-introduction/> (English and Spanish version for download), last visited Jan 16, 2023.

RAVEN, John: The New Wealth of Nations, A New Enquiry Into the Nature and Origins of the Wealth of Nations and the Societal Learning Arrangements Needed for a Sustainable Society, Royal Fireworks Press / Bloomfield Books, New York, USA / Sudbury, England 1995; available as PDF on: http://eyeonsociety.co.uk/resources/fulllist.html#new_wealth

The ***RC51 Newsletter*** is open for permanent feedback to integrate new suggestions and ideas to achieve its goal: promote news among the ISA RC51 members and a broader scientific community interested in sociocybernetics.

Please contact the newsletter editor for any information you would like to include or any further suggestion.

Toru Takahashi and Andrew Mitchell
rc51newsletter@sociocybernetics.org

RC51 website <https://sociocybernetics.org/>
ISA website <http://www.isa-sociology.org>

other RC51 websites

Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/groups/ISARC51Sociocybernetics/>

Twitter <https://twitter.com/RC51sociocyber1>

Youtube Channel <https://tinyurl.com/RC51youtubechannel>



End of RC51 newsletter Issue 43