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Tristes Tropiques. Systems Theory and the Literary Scene

Abstract: *In Niklas Luhmann's later works on social exclusion, his concept of environment is no longer strictly epistemological but becomes increasingly ethnographic. From a systems theoretical point of view, environments are mere effects of social systems and their need to distinguish constantly between essential operations and operations that are of no consequence for the continuous reproduction of the systems' identities. However, under certain circumstances environments turn out to be spatial. One could even say that on the analytical agenda the spatial dimension of exclusion takes precedence over the temporal dimension of sociality to the same degree that sociality becomes a primarily temporal reality – and systems theory describes its own approach as a turn to radical temporalization of all social structures. In these spaces or territories it is not communication that can be observed but human beings reduced to their bodily state. Having become a kind of container for socially unadressable bodies, this environment of the functionally differentiated world society does not require empirical social research or complex explanations, but the evidence-producing strategies of ethnographic fieldwork or simply travel notes.*

One of the essential qualities of self-operating social systems is that they are not directed from the outside and provide their own causality. But you may take it as a kind of fatal irony that systems theory – while removing all non-social, i. e. non-communicative, elements from the social dimension – has to face in the end the return of what the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1998) has recently called ›bare life‹: a form in which certain human beings cannot be addressed socially and are thus reduced to their bodily existence. I say ›*certain*‹ human beings, but I have to correct myself: global social systems produce these bodies in *large* quantities by mere virtue of their operation. Niklas Luhmann has stated repeatedly (cf. 1984, 346ff.) that societies do not consist of human beings or individuals as their elements but of communications, although these communications are regularly attributed to human beings as ›actors‹. But a social theory that with good reason rejects any anthropological foundation still has to observe the growing masses of socially divested human beings subsisting in the environments of global social systems, like the barbarians described by Aristotle in his *Politics* (1973, 49), for whom he felt pity because they had the unhappy fate to live outside the polis, the perfect social community, which the Greek had invented.

This paper calls the attention of the reader to the way Niklas Luhmann in his later texts on exclusion *semantically*, as he would have said, *as literature*, as I

want to argue, stages the zones of exclusion. Luhmann had his most shocking experiences in Brazil's zones of exclusion, where he occasionally visited the favelas. Urban life in those parts of Brazilian cities is characterized by a degree of misery that, as Luhmann (1995a, 147) writes, is «beyond any description». The situation in these zones of exclusion defies description, yet it requires sociological analysis. Luhmann uses a couple of very revealing images or metaphors to perform this paradoxical task, that is, to describe the indescribable:

> Whereas in the zones of inclusion human beings matter as persons, in the zones of exclusion it is only their bodies that count. Physical violence, sexuality and the urge to satisfy basic human needs are given free rein, and become directly and immediately relevant without being civilized by the symbolic codes developed by social systems for this purpose. There is no way to connect complex social expectations with situations in which these basic needs imperatively demand satisfaction. Under these circumstances human beings are only interested in the factors that determine the situation, and other human bodies and their behavior are of utmost importance. This may remind the sociological observer of very ancient social orders, but as a matter of fact, these zones of exclusions are merely by-products of a modern functionally differentiated society. (Luhmann 1997, 632f.)

Luhmann's description repeats a widespread symbolic understanding of sociality, which presupposes that social order can only emerge as a result of a fundamental rupture with a state of nature and that it has to be reminded constantly of the possibility of falling back into the primordial state of things. In the zones of exclusion an a-social, a socially bare life prevails. Human beings reduced to their bodies and bodily reactions no longer regard the communicative requirements of social systems and satisfy their needs and desires without respecting the socially and culturally legitimized forms of their fulfillment. The use of physical violence is no longer restricted to the sovereign state, which loses its monopoly of power; sexuality is performed in a way that does not respect any semantics of love; physical needs can be satisfied without spending money because people do not have any and would starve to death otherwise.

The problem of exclusion, perceived sociologically and not morally, can by no means be solved with the rhetoric of universal human rights – »let alone with classical concepts like societas civilis or communitas« (Luhmann 1995a, 149f.). In relying on these concepts, we proceed, as Luhmann, quoting from Wilhelm Busch's *Max and Moritz*, puts it, like the widow Bolte, who goes down to her cellar to get some sauerkraut, which she eats warmed up. In a footnote to his lecture »Beyond barbarism« Luhmann informs the reader that his reference to the widow Bolte was not really appreciated by his audience. Yet, in the pub-

lished version of his text Luhmann (1995a, 150) confirms the reference to this classic topos of German humor and states: »Perhaps I came too close to the crucial point of the matter.« Now, I would like to draw your attention to the fact that here – as in many other passages of Luhmann's works – the surprising switch from theoretical to literary discourse is of central and, maybe, symptomatic importance. He not only uses literary discourse at the end of the text, which leaves the reader in a state of perplexity, but literary discourse organizes the whole perspective Luhmann adopts to solve the problem of describing the indescribable. These paradoxical descriptions start with a discursive gesture of an unambiguously ethnological, or better, *ethnographic* origin – a gesture which serves as a subtle means to strengthen the credibility or authenticity of anthropological texts that explore strange worlds or, more precisely, the worlds of strangeness. This gesture is simply an attempt to convince readers of ethnological texts that their authors »were there in the full sense of the word.« As Clifford Geertz (1993, 24) writes at the end of his essay entitled »Being there: Anthropology and the Scene of Writing«: »A hundred and fifteen years (if we date our profession, as conventionally, from Tylor) of asseverational prose and literary innocence is long enough.« Despite the fascination of fieldwork, Geertz argues that it is absolutely necessary to consider scientifically all the literary conventions or procedures an author resorts to in order to produce the effect of ›being there‹, which is the basis for the evidence and truth of anthropological texts.

Now, Luhmann's texts on the zones of exclusion very clearly reveal the moment that their author, who is not very enthusiastic about empirical social research anyway, discovers his utter fascination with what Geertz calls the effect of »being there«, that is, with fieldwork – though, as we shall see, it is fieldwork in a rather unprofessional and somewhat touristic sense. However, it is quite interesting to observe that this unprofessional and touristic approach to these zones, which are excluded from cultural norms and from the possibility of participating in the communications of global social systems, has been sanctioned by one of the leading anthropologists of our time as »a useful training in observation«. Lévi-Strauss (1992, 62) writes in his *Tristes Tropiques*: »I have learned since then what a useful training in observation such short glimpses of a town, an area or a culture can provide and how – because of the intense concentration forced upon one by the brevity of the stay – one may even grasp certain features which, in other circumstances, might have long remained hidden.« For one short moment, for the moment of a short glimpse, the text of the sociologist reveals the moment when its author appears on the scene described by the title of the text: »Beyond barbarism«. »Beyond barbarism« does not mean, as one may well assume, ›in civilization‹, but, on the contrary, it marks a place which is even more barbarian than Greek barbarism, a kind of *hyper-barbarism*. »Beyond barbarism« indicates a distinction

that has lost its other side, because barbarism in the Greek sense of the word does not function without constant reference to its antithesis or alternative, which is perfection and the »beauty of the form of life« as Luhmann (1995a, 143) writes, i.e. in Greek terms *éthos* and *philía*. If modern barbarism has to be considered as the opposite of the modern functionally differentiated world society and if this society is at the same time identified as the cause of barbarism (and not its solution), then »Beyond Barbarism« marks a space with no exit or escape. The Greeks did not completely exclude the possibility of former barbarians adopting the structures of the polis, the city-community, and thus becoming human in the philosophical sense of the word, that is, following the definition of Aristotle: *political beings*. Modern sociology, on the other hand, has to confront its barbarians with the theoretically gained knowledge that the »many-too-many« (die *Vielzuvielen*), as Nietzsche called them, have to accept their destiny and remain in the territorial environment of the globalized social system.

At the end of Luhmann's text, a process that transforms an *epistemological* concept into an *ethnographic* one has been accomplished. From a systems-theoretical point of view you cannot enter the environments of social systems, because these environments are mere projections of the systems, which permanently have to distinguish between essential operations and operations that are of no consequence for the continuous reproduction of the systems' identities. However, under certain circumstances environments turn out to be spatial, one could even say: to the same degree that sociality becomes a primarily temporal reality – and systems theory describes its own approach as the turn to radical temporalization of all social structures – the spatial dimension of exclusion takes precedence over the temporal dimension of sociality on the theoretical agenda. What can be observed in these spaces or territories is no longer communications but human beings reduced to their bodily state. This environment, which has become a kind of container for socially unadressable bodies, a container, by the way, with the obvious function of containment – if we consider the response of the ›first world‹ to the problems of global mass migration –: this environment of the functionally differentiated society does not require empirical social research, but the evidence-producing strategies of fieldwork or simply travel notes. Travel notes that enable the reader to grasp certain features of the situation without any empirical or even theoretical sophistication. The knowledge of the anthropologist as well as that of the sociologist descending from the heights of theoretical abstraction is of a far less empirical than *phenomenological* nature. It obeys the logic of evidence and the full presence of sense. The decisive passage of his lecture in which the sociologist, adopting the literary manners exhibited in anthropological field research, strongly affirms his having been there:

> Although it may surprise all those who are well-meaning, it has to be confirmed that there *are* exclusions and that they occur massively and lead to a kind of misery which defies description. Anybody who dares to make a trip to the favelas of the big South American cities and succeeds in leaving them alive can attest to this. Even a trip to the settlements left behind as a result of the shut-down of the mining industry in Wales will convince you of this. Empirical research is not necessary for this purpose. Anybody who trusts his eyes can see it – to such a degree of intensity that every explanation fails. (Luhmann 1995a, 147)

Let me underline: exclusion is a fact; it occurs massively and manifests itself in enormous misery. It defies description, a remark that should be a provocation for sociological constructivism, which does not accept any ›data‹ or ›pure givens‹ outside the categories of description and the perspectives created by them. Luhmann understands systems theory as a theory of observation and description of modern society – informed and guided by the semantic material continuously produced by society in its operations of self-observation and self-description. What meaning can a phenomenon which defies description, that is to say, is not only beyond the observation of the professional sociologist but also eludes those who are massively excluded – what meaning can this phenomenon have for such a highly reflective theory? Now, the sociological paradox – the indescribability of the misery of exclusion – is connected with a second paradox that is even more striking: what defies description can on the other hand be »reported« by any – what Lévi-Strauss calls – »Sunday anthropologist« who is out there in the zones of exclusion. An object which functions as a kind of black box, because it resists every attempt of description, can suddenly be penetrated by any observer, whether or not he or she is a skilled sociologist.

But the ease of making observations contrasts very sharply with the observer's willingness, which is typically ethnographic, to risk his own life. Ethnological expeditions are always journeys of life and death; they require a ›subject who is willing to take risks‹: You don't simply visit the favelas, you dare to enter them, which implies that it is uncertain whether or not you will ever return. Alluding to the high risk involved with being a fieldworker in anthropology is one of the typical literary conventions of ethnographic adventure. In the following sentences, Luhmann opens the zone of exclusion geographically to avoid connotations of exoticism: From the sociological perspective, Brazilian favelas are comparable to the zones of recent deindustrialization in the centers of the First World. You don't actually have to take a trip to the triste tropics, because you can find what you are looking in your own neighborhood. But before anyone can ask about the theoretical perspectives or the basic statistical parameters which would make a comparison of Brazilian favelas and deindustrialized zones in Wales possible and plausible, Luhmann reassures his readers

in the final lines of the passage I have just quoted from that the fact of exclusion cannot be adequately perceived by a theoretically organized or empirically verified knowledge. It isn't necessary to do empirical research or resort to old or new explanations to discern the fact of exclusion. *Being an eyewitness is enough*: »Whoever trusts his eyes can see it.« And he can observe its dramatic features far better than he can trust the current explanations of Marxian or post-Marxian theorists of the world system – an argument, which by the way not only applies to the theoretical explanations of which Luhmann disapproves but also to his own sociological explanation, which declares exclusion to be a normal and possibly normalizable by-product of the simple functioning of global social systems.

When Luhmann dismisses all empirical research on exclusion as well as all current attempts to grasp exclusion theoretically on the grounds that neither empirical inquiries nor theoretical arguments do justice to the brutal fact of what they are trying to explain, which in a certain respect is situated outside the symbolic order and therefore, in psychoanalytical terms, manifests the irruption of the »real« or the »symptom« – when Luhmann argues in this way, he visibly repeats a certain gesture that is typical for the ethnographic mode of knowledge and can be found perhaps in its purest form in the work of the dean of structural anthropology, Claude Lévi-Strauss. The texts of Lévi-Strauss, undoubtedly one of the greatest anthropologists of the last century, can be compared with the work of Niklas Luhmann in more than one respect – I mention the degree of theoretical abstraction, which is only the other side of their ability to evoke scenes of overwhelming phenomenological concreteness and evidence. In the chapter concerning *Tristes Tropiques* of his book on »The Anthropologist as Author«, Clifford Geertz (1993, 39) reminds his readers that Lévi-Strauss in writing this »absolute book« reaffirms the tradition of a strong polemic against the Occident. There is no doubt that *Tristes Tropiques* was an indictment of Europe because of the influence it wielded over the non-European civilizations. Compared with the »devastating bitterness and power of Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques*«, Geertz argues, the radical anti-colonialist Franz Fanon sounds »positively genial«.

Now, we shall see that Luhmann, although he does not get involved in the business of morally condemning the Occident, in certain important respects agrees with Lévi-Strauss because he also rejects all the explanations of misery that connect it with structures of »exploitation« or »social repression« and thus indicate a perspective of social and political liberation. All the diagnoses of exclusion that can more or less be traced back to the work of Karl Marx are too »friendly« – the intensity of their verdict on the centers of inclusion is irrelevant – because they impute an interest on the part of powerful social groups in perpetuating the misery of exclusion: »Capitalism, the ruling alliance of financial and industrial capital with the military or the powerful families of the

country«, is one of the classic explanations for the existence of massive global inequality that Luhmann cites. Now again, it is quite interesting to see that Luhmann (1995a, 147) does not really replace these rather complex theories derived from the discursive context of political economy with even more complex theories, but simply rejects them in the name of the ›first glimpse‹ or immediate perception: »When you look closely, you do not find anything that can be exploited or repressed. What you find are human beings reduced to their bodily existence, trying to survive to the next day.«

Luhmann entitled his essay »Beyond barbarism,« and he located the new barbarism geographically in the Brazilian favelas. However, for more than one reason barbarism is not the appropriate term for the social reality that obtains in those areas of the world. One of these reasons is that the Greeks, who coined the term, regarded the barbarians – who literally are those who do not possess articulated language – as *politically* inferior but of equal rank as *military* opponents. »Beyond barbarism« therefore indicates a zone whose inhabitants can never become dangerous for the ›civilized‹ regions of the world because, not having the status of political subjects or persons, they are unable to launch an attack against the supposed oppressors. »There is great evidence for the thesis«, Luhmann writes in another text on »Inclusion and Exclusion« (1995b, 262) that »in the zones of exclusion human beings are only regarded – and only regard themselves – as bodies and not persons«. Giving an example for this observation, Luhmann once again refers to the »Brazilian cities«. It is quite interesting to see that the anthropologist Lévi-Strauss (1992, 96) shows a similar *emblematic use* of Brazilian cities in his *Tristes Tropiques* when he comments on his first view on Sao Paulo: »I was staggered to discover that so many of their districts were already fifty years old and that they should display the signs of decrepitude with such a lack of shame«. And he continues: »Rusty old iron, red trams with the appearance of fire engines, mahogany bars with polished brass rails; brick-built warehouses in deserted streets, there was only the wind to sweep away the rubbish. [...] mazes of seedy buildings«. However, despite the »heterogeneous shapes« of the »concrete blocks« that face each other in a »frozen jumble«, Lévi-Strauss (1992, 97) leaves no doubt of his admiration of Sao Paulo: »I never thought that Sao Paulo was ugly.« It is therefore not Brazil – the privileged field of his anthropological research – but India that finds itself exactly in the place that Luhmann indicates with his formula »Beyond barbarism«. The section in *Tristes Tropiques* is simply entitled »Crowds« (1992, 134) signalizing the problematic symbolic status of its members.

I would like to comment on some passages taken from this section of Lévi-Strauss' travel notes:

> [...] the large towns of India are slum areas. What we are ashamed of as if it were a disgrace, and regard as a kind of leprosy, is, in India, the urban phenomenon, reduced to its ultimate expression« – the ›crowds‹

are only another expression for the phenomenon that Luhmann
describes as an »existence reduced to its bodily aspects«. Lévi-Strauss
goes on: »the herding together of individuals whose only reason for
living is to herd together in millions, whatever the conditions of life
may be. Filth, chaos, promiscuity, congestion; ruins, huts, mud, dirt;
dung, urine, pus, humors, secretions and running sores: all the things
against which we expect urban life to give us organized protection, all
the things we hate and guard against at such great cost, all these by-
products of cohabitation do not set any limitation on it in India. They
are more like a natural environment which the Indian town needs in
order to prosper. To every individual, any street, footpath or alley
affords a home, where he can sit, sleep, and even pick up his food
straight from the glutinous filth (Lévi-Strauss 1992, 134).

While the European visitor is confronted with strange social relations in tropi-
cal America – relations which he can still regard as such and analyze with his
anthropological tools – the slum areas of Indian towns are situated in a
dimension which we may call *beyond the line*. In Lévi-Strauss's view, this line
does not simply separate better forms of social life from worse forms, it is not
simply the well-known and well-balanced line of social inequality – it marks
what we may call the ›great divide‹ between human and subhuman life, it
opposes ›bare life‹ to ›human existence‹, or to express it another way, it rein-
troduces forms of life which are culturally perceived as subhuman into the
sphere of human life itself. Therefore, the transgressing of this line provides
the greatest challenge to all forms of scientific analysis, sociologically oriented
forms as well as anthropologically oriented forms. Lévi-Strauss (1992, 135)
concludes: »In southern Asia, on the contrary, reality seems to be either far
below or far in excess of what man is entitled to demand of the world, and of
man.« The reason for this philosophical statement is rooted in daily life: »Daily
life appears to be a permanent repudiation of the concept of human relations.«
Yet, Lévi-Strauss does not simply pretend, as Luhmann does, to abandon this
concept because of its obvious inapplicability to the reality of certain areas of
the world. He does not do so, although like Luhmann, he is one of the most
prominent critics of humanist or anthropological illusionism: societies do not
consist of human beings; human beings, or in sociological terms, actors are
mere points of social attribution – not final elements of sociality. According to
Luhmann as well as the structuralist Lévi-Strauss, sociality is defined as a spe-
cific level of order which cannot be reduced to one of the factors that is neces-
sary to establish and maintain that order. However, both Luhmann and Lévi-
Strauss characterize the zones of exclusion in a way that cannot be understood
without reference to the symbolic dimension of so-called humanist discourse.
The abandonment of humanist discourse does not create a vital problem for
the zones of inclusion because the human beings included are symbolically
respected by the social order in more than one way – although of course even

under conditions of inclusion the social order is not simply a mirror of the needs and interests of individuals.

What irritates the European observer more than anything else about the situation in southern India is the willingness of the people there to renounce their fundamental right to be treated as equals: »It never occurs to them [...] to set themselves up as equals. [...] If one tried to treat these unfortunate wretches as equals, they would protest against that injustice of one's doing so; they do not want to be equal; they beg, they entreat you to crush them with your pride, since it is from the widening of the gap between you and them that they expect their mite« (Lévi-Strauss 1992, 136). As long as we consider social relations under the aspect of mutual respect and acknowledgment, we have to deny the social quality of what occurs in the zones of exclusion. Therefore, Lévi-Strauss (1992, 136) writes: »All the primary situations which establish relationships between people are distorted; the rules of the social game are falsified and one doesn't know where to begin.« This is what Luhmann (1995b, 262f.) repeats in his essays on exclusion, using nearly the same words: »Anything that we as persons can perceive loses significance, and any attempt to achieve social effects by influencing attitudes is futile. This would require a context of social control and social community that cannot be assumed.« Thus in the zones of exclusion one does not know where to begin. Under such circumstances you cannot communicate in the full sense of the term but must rely heavily on your ability to react promptly to constantly changing conditions. In Luhmann's opinion, what really counts is the ability to adjust one's behavior immediately to new, unexpected events. In the zones of exclusion sociality, then, is more or less a question of perception and not one of communication.

Yet, it is quite interesting that Luhmann does not regard the conditions in the zones of exclusion as absolutely separate from the situation in the centers of inclusion. In a quite symptomatic footnote in one of his texts on exclusion, he considers the widespread interest in soccer, tennis, ice hockey and other speed sports as a ›preadaptive advance‹: admiration of a faculty which is not required of most of us at the moment (Luhmann 1995b, 263). So it may well be that the management of ›bare life‹ in the future will become a requirement for all of us. The situation in the zones of exclusion could be a foreshadowing of future developments: under the social surface of the large functional systems Luhmann detects ›services of friendship‹, or networks of mutual benefit, which elsewhere are simply called ›corruption‹ and whose main feature is that they are not formally institutionalized and therefore cannot be represented as they function surreptitiously. It is the total separation of sociality from the normative, the reduction of social structures to mere temporary realities or *events* that are constantly substituted with other, functionally equivalent social arrangements which makes the situation in the centers of modern society comparable to the zones of the ›absence of sociality‹. Lévi-Strauss clearly brings this point

into focus when in his final remarks on southern Asia he describes the cultural prerequisites of all mass – that is, very heavily populated – societies in contrast to the very sparsely populated native communities in Brazil which are characterized above all by the existence of a *symbolic structure* that bridges the ontological gap between the social and the non-social, or the ›natural‹:

> In America, I was, first and foremost, looking at natural or urban landscapes, and in both cases these are objects defined by their shapes, colors and peculiar structures, which confer on them an existence independent of the living beings who occupy them. In India, these large objects have disappeared, having been destroyed by history and reduced to a physical or human dust which has become the only reality. [...] A sociological order worn away over hundreds of centuries was collapsing, and it was replaced by a multiplicity of interpersonal relationships, so completely did the density interpose itself between the observer and the disintegrating object. (Lévi-Strauss 1992, 143)

What systems theory theorizes is in fact the *zero degree of social order* – or, I should say, the minimum social order required to stabilize a reality in which these »large objects« have been replaced by a concept of communication that grounds in the model of Ego/Alter (Stäheli 2000, 41). For Lévi-Strauss, the term ›large objects‹ designates the »structures that in the past maintained a few hundred million human particles within organized frameworks«. As systems theory has no place for cultural or ›symbolic‹ processes, apart from the cultural and symbolic codes that organize the reproduction of functional systems, it begins its line of reasoning with the total rejection of all ontology, which is just another word for the philosophical knowledge of large objects.

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