

## Thomas Luckmann (October 14, 1927–May 10, 2016)

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On May 10, 2016, Thomas Luckmann passed away at his residence in Austria (Ossiacher See) at the age of 88 years. One of the most outstanding representatives of sociology of the past decades left us. An influential personality, his name is inextricably connected to the University of Konstanz and to the continuation of Alfred Schütz's work on the "structures of the lifeworld". Luckmann gained worldwide attention due to his numerous contributions to the foundation of phenomenological sociology, the sociology of religion in modern societies, and the analysis of communicative genres and the sociology of knowledge.

Born in 1927 in Jesenice, Slovenia, as the only child of a Slovenian mother and an Austrian father, Luckmann attended high school in Klagenfurt, shortly after fleeing from Ljubljana due to the 1941 Italian occupation. The murder of his father and other relatives motivated his mother to relocate the family in Vienna in 1943. Living in Austria, and having thus formally acquired German citizenship, Luckmann was drafted by the army. He became a prisoner of war in the spring of 1945, but was able to escape after three months. He then settled in Vienna, once again. After graduating from "Notmatura," he began studying linguistics in 1947, German culture, psychology, and philosophy, first in Vienna, and then in Innsbruck from 1948 on. His marriage to Benita Petkevic in January 1950 in Salzburg is a turning point in his life. A few months later, they both traveled to the United States to study at the *New School for Social Research* in New York. Among Luckmann's teachers are Alfred Schütz, Dorion Cairns, Albert Salomon, and Carl Mayer. After the participation in a research project led by Mayer—accompanied by regular research visits in Germany, most particularly Freiburg—and his doctoral thesis on the sociology of religion in 1956, Luckmann obtained his first academic position at Hobart College in Geneva, New York. After the death of Schütz, Luckmann became

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the successor of his former teacher at the *New School* in 1960. In 1965, Luckmann was granted a professorship at the University of Frankfurt/M., and then in 1970 at the University of Konstanz, where he taught and conducted his research until his retirement in 1994. Moving from Frankfurt to Konstanz is yet another turning point in Thomas Luckmann's academic life.

In Konstanz, Luckmann founded the Social Science Archive (Alfred Schütz's Memorial Archives), together with Richard Grathoff and Walter M. Sprondel. The Archive's work focused on collecting the research accounts of German-speaking social scientist emigrants scattered around the world. In the meantime, it became the official archive of the "German Sociological Association".<sup>1</sup> The long-lasting Konstanz period was also marked by intensive interdisciplinary work with colleagues in history, linguistics, and literature. He participated in the group "Poetics and Hermeneutics," the Collaborative Research Center 511 "Literature and Anthropology," as well as in the research group "Moral Communication," which he led in collaboration with Jörg Bergmann.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond the circle of experts in sociology, Thomas Luckmann became most famous alongside his longtime friend and colleague Peter L. Berger through their collaborative work, *The Social Construction of Reality*. Their investigation was first published in English in 1966, and translated into German three years later by Monika Plessner under the title *Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit*. The book, a study conceived as an essay, rose as a classic of the discipline, and became one of the best-selling and most influential sociological works of all time. Its numerous translations helped promote their work across the world and into a vast array of disciplines.<sup>3</sup> Due to the original English title, the label of "social-construction" became associated with diverse controversies with regard to the methodologies used in sociology. Nevertheless, Luckmann as well as Berger refrain from describing themselves as "social constructivists" or "social constructionists". Their book though gained considerable resonance at the time, and is therefore highly influential for the 1960s' development of new variants of qualitative research especially in Germany.

Taking into account the perspective of the *Social Construction*, Luckmann exemplarily worked on developing a general sociological theory, and dedicated his life-work to empirical-sociological research: From his training years in New York while working on issues related to the sociology of religion (in the context of the research project led by Carl Mayer at the New School for Social Research), he developed a general sociology of religion with a particularly contemporary analysis. The latter work, later translated into an extended English version in 1967 under the formative title *The Invisible Religion*, was first published in German in 1963 under the title *Das Problem der Religion in der modernen Gesellschaft*. In addition to a critique of popular secularization ideas and of (especially in the German discussion)

<sup>1</sup> See the report written by Dreher and Göttlich (2015: 225–234).

<sup>2</sup> See, together with Jörg Bergmann, the edition of the two volumes *Kommunikative Konstruktion von Moral* (Bergmann and Luckmann 1999), as well as Luckmann (1998).

<sup>3</sup> The 50 year anniversary of the *Social Construction* was celebrated in 2016 with the publication of "Special Issues" dedicated to the two international traditions in *Cultural Sociology* (Vera 2016) and *Human Studies* (Endreß and Nicolae 2016).

the narrow interests the sociology of religion had in the years after the Second World War, Luckmann strictly developed in this research a perspective with a functional analysis on religion, and outlined the “privatization of religion” as a distinctive feature of the era.

Following the *Social Construction's* genealogical perspective on social reality, the analysis of knowledge and speech became central to Luckmann's ongoing research on the social and meaningful construction (“Aufbau”) of the social world. Fundamentally, he first presented in 1969 in the *Handbuch der empirischen Sozialforschung*, a contribution to the “sociology of language,” which settles diachronic- and synchronous-based perspectives on the relationship between language, history, and social situations, with regard to the “social functions” of language (Luckmann 1969). The latter contribution was also published in English in 1975 as a separate study entitled “The Sociology of Language” (Luckmann 1975); yet another document of Luckmann's private as well as scientific transatlantic life-form.

Luckmann's intensive and persistent preoccupation with communicative processes and world-making social phenomena left us eminent practical research avenues to explore, in sociology and beyond (e.g., in linguistics). These include his development of a theory and of an empirical analysis of “communicative genres,” i.e., of linguistic forms, such as jokes, proverbs, or gossip, that are socially coagulated patterns of communicating processes deposited in our social stock of knowledge, shaping the specificity of sociocultural linguistic practices. These not only serve the communicative genres of social knowledge, they also act as a means of coordinating action and social structure formation. Drawing on the processuality and historicity of the social world, Luckmann's empirical research pays great attention to the methodically controlled reconstruction of its genesis, temporality, and dynamics. The sequential analysis of changes of everyday communicative processes forming and shaping social reality is, according to Luckmann, a—if not *the*—valuable way of conducting empirical sociological research: “Sequential analysis... enables us to trace step by step the processes by which social reality is constructed and reconstructed” (Luckmann 2013: 46).

His study of communicative processes and forms in interaction, as well as his understanding of communication as a form of social action, consistently led Luckmann to deepen his interest in questions regarding the analysis of action. He devoted a study to this field of research entitled *Theorie des sozialen Handelns* in 1992. This fundamental insight in the analytical implications and requirements for the comprehension of human action takes up his teacher Alfred Schütz's approach in *The Structures of the Life-World*. Drawing on Schütz's notes and unfinished manuscripts, Luckmann took it upon himself to publish them; an endeavor to which he committed himself for over 20 years—it goes without saying that he also added some of his own accents onto his former professor's work.<sup>4</sup> As a social theory *magnum opus*, the book continues and rounds up the “social construction” project

<sup>4</sup> The *Structures of the Life-World* first appeared in two volumes, the first appeared in English in 1973, and the second volume in German in 1984 (the German-language versions of the first volume followed in 1979, the English-language of the second in 1989). These are since 2003 available in a one-volume German edition.

with a substantial phenomenological basis, oriented towards the analysis of societal constellations, based on—as well as learning from—empirical research, and therefore introducing a general sociological perspective. Its methodological self-understanding—as far as its philosophical and phenomenological core is concerned—, marked the beginning of a “proto-sociology” in contrast to the empirical and historical variants of sociological analyses.

The large scale and far-reaching work of Luckmann still offers manifold opportunities for new discoveries in sociology and other related disciplines. The essential of his numerous publications, outlining his research areas, is now available in two volumes of selected essays: *Wissen und Gesellschaft. Ausgewählte Aufsätze 1981–2002* (Konstanz: UVK 2002, edited by Hubert Knoblauch, Jürgen Raab, and Bernt Schnettler) and *Lebenswelt, Identität und Gesellschaft. Schriften zur Wissens- und Protozoziologie* (Konstanz: UVK 2007, edited by Jochen Dreher).

The list of Luckmann’s classic writings is completed by canonical contributions to the analysis of knowledge, communications, religion, morality, time, and social action, as well as his founding elaboration of the phenomenologically informed sociology of knowledge in the *Strukturen der Lebenswelt*. Thomas Luckmann also conducted research that contributed to theories on identity and society, which assures him a prominent place in the history of sociological research during the second half of the twentieth century. Many of Luckmann’s suggestions on theoretical and empirical research remain relevant today and are significant to several research areas in sociology, and beyond.<sup>5</sup> The multidisciplinary favorable reception of his work is enhanced by his rejection of universal theories, and his strong reserve towards the encapsulation of intellectuals.<sup>6</sup> The worldwide recognition of Luckmann’s work is also reflected in his numerous invitations to conferences, visiting professorships, and honors. These, in Germany, come from the initiative of Alois Hahn who awarded Luckmann a Honorary doctorate from University of Trier, in December 1999. He also received a prize for his outstanding lifetime contribution to sociology from the German Sociological Association at its 2002 Congress in Leipzig, and was made an honorary member of this Association in early 2016. Luckmann’s research methodology as well as his theoretical and conceptual innovations will perpetuate his influence and impacts far beyond sociology.

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<sup>5</sup> Obituary of Thomas Luckmann by Günthner (2016), Knoblauch (2016), Schnettler (2016), and Bergmann (2016). Other obituaries can be found on the following page: <http://www.soz.uni-bayreuth.de/de/news/Luckmann-Todesnachricht/index.html>.

<sup>6</sup> See Sprondel (1994: 9): “Luckmann sind Vorgänge der sozialen Schließung, die mit Schulbildung einherzugehen pflegen, noch immer ein Greuel.”

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