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Niklas Luhmann (1927–1998) is considered one of the major sociological system theorists alongside Buckley, Parsons and Homans. After a basic law degree and ten years as a city official in Lüneburg, he studied for Talcott Parsons at Harvard in the early 1960s and laid the foundation for his own system theory. He eventually became a professor of sociology at the University of Bielefeld. Luhmann system theory has provided the theoretical underpinnings for a variety of empirical applications; one of few Swedish examples is **Jan-Inge Jönhills environmental sociological theory**. A number of sports scholars have taken an interest in Luhmann's system thinking, with Jan Ove Tangen's book *Hvordan er idrett mulig? Skisse til en idrettssosiologi* as the outstanding Nordic example. In 2010, a new anthology on the subject was published, *Observing Sports: Modern System Theoretical Approaches* compiled by Ulrik Wagner, Rasmus K. Storm and John Hoberman (Hofmann-Verlag). In nine contributions by German, Danish and Norwegian scholars different ways of applying Luhmann's system theory is presented and discussed. In a final contribution John Hoberman comment on the various contributions. Kalle Jonasson, himself fascinated by Luhmann's work, has reviewed the book for [idrottsforum.org](http://idrottsforum.org). He was impressed by the varied applications of system theory, and highlights in particular three chapters that contribute to the further development of the general systems theory.

## The System of Sport Studies

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*Ulrik Wagner, Rasmus K. Storm & John Hoberman (red)*

**Observing Sport: Modern System Theoretical Approaches**

282 sidor, hft.

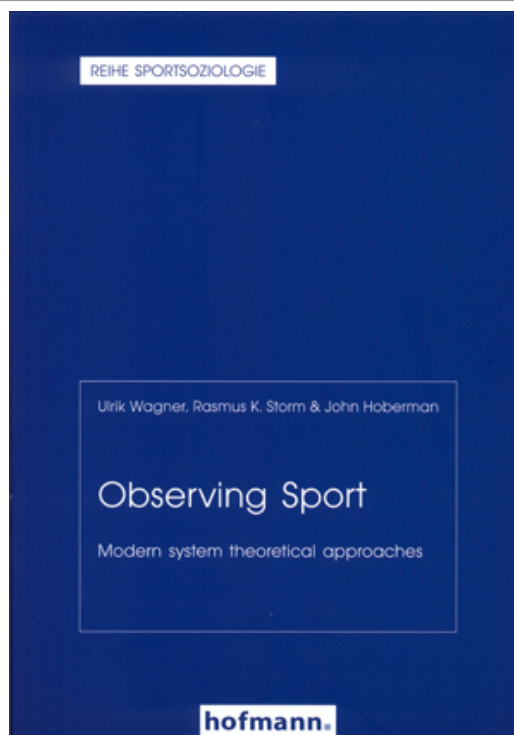
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(Reihe Sportssoziologie)

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How can organizations and institutions guarantee their survival while still being open to change? There isn't a collective that doesn't have hardships with solving this conundrum. But the discussion could also be extended to things and objects. The cell, for instance, must, in order to survive, constantly reproduce itself. This implies, then, that change and reproduction might be intertwined. It also points to that there might be a central organizational principle that is common for all entities.

Such an all-encompassing rationale is at least what the late German sociologist Niklas Luhmann endeavored to establish throughout his career. He found that the metaphor of system was apt for understanding how organizational formation and change occurred. Although being in considerable debt to the American sociologist Talcott Parsons, Luhmann is not widely applied in the Anglophone world. At least this is the claim of – and partly a *raison d'être* for – *Observing sport: Modern system theoretical approaches*, an anthology edited by two Danish sport scholars, Ulrik Wagner and Rasmus Storm, and the American sport sociologist John Hoberman.



After the introduction of how sport could be seen through the lens of a modern system theoretical approach and a brief presentation of the content, nine studies and a concluding commentary, each constituting a chapter, follow. Two main questions, one epistemological and one ontological, of the anthology as a whole – as a system, even! – could be said to be addressed in the introduction: *Is the system approach appropriate for studying sport? Does sport have function and role in modern society?*

As well in the introduction as in the nine studies, which by the way are written by exclusively Danish, Norwegian, and German scholars, Luhmann's idiosyncratic nomenclature makes itself felt through the application of concepts such as 'autopoiesis', 'structural coupling', 'contingency', and 'symbolic generalized medium'. Terms such as 'communication', 'medium', 'meaning', 'code', and 'action' may at first seem familiar, but are throughout the demonstrations and explications endowed with "new" meanings. The appendix with a brief glossary of Luhmann's concept is certainly good service for the reader. The high level of abstraction in Luhmann's vocabulary is precisely what the commenting editor Hoberman objects to in his concluding remarks on the anthology. Since it is so central to the anthology, Luhmann's system approach ought to be briefly recapitulated here.

Social systems have exponentially arisen in modernity through a process Luhmann calls 'functional differentiation'. This is significantly a modern feature. The Durkheimian legacy regarding the division of labor as a pivotal practice of modern societies might here be discerned in Luhmann, although on the level of larger entities, such as law, science and art. Interestingly enough, sport is not covered in Luhmann's fundamental systematization of modernity. Using Bjørn Schiermer's (one of the contributing writers) words, sport is '*terra incognita* for Luhmann' (Schiermer, p. 260). This makes the present anthology a welcome contribution, since the social science of sport needs to try out all existing theories to fully comprehend its subject.

” However, this de-anthropo-centering move makes him a fruitful theorist for the increasingly influential perspectives of “the nonhuman turn”, which does not despise humans as much as emphasizing the gravity and agency of nonhuman actors as well.

A system is a closed structure of communication that is reproduced by statements and actions that are held to confirm its core rationale. Thus the system makes distinction to sort out what is relevant for it. Consequently, the system isn't fully closed, since it through its distinguishing practice affirms what could be of service in its reproduction, its 'autopoiesis'. A system is located in an environment, from which through observation it distinguishes what elements could be useful in its constant self-establishment. All systems are held to have a main distinction, which Luhmann calls the "symbolic generalized medium". All actions and communications in the system are filtered through this medium. It is therefore paramount, when applying system theory, to identify this medium. According to the lion's share of the chapters in *Observing sport*, the primary distinction of the social system of sport is win/lose, i.e. the practice of inaugurating a winner. The Norwegian sport sociologist Jan-Ove Tangen, who is the author of one of the chapters, has rigorously elaborated with this and other 'binary codes' in the system of sport starting with his dissertation in 1997.

Luhmann is renowned for displacing the focal point of sociology from human subjects to communication. This, according to Hoberman's concluding remarks, makes Luhmann a theorist that always risks to be seen as anti-humanistic. However, this de-anthropo-centering move makes him a fruitful theorist for the increasingly influential perspectives of "the nonhuman turn", which does not despise humans as much as emphasizing the gravity and agency of nonhuman actors as well.[1]

Concerning the individual chapters, the focal points vary widely, both regarding to what sport is analyzed, and on what level this is conducted. WADA, extreme sports, European top-level football, student-athletes, and dynamics in team-sport are just a few of the cases put under scrutiny in the various contributions. What will interest the reader is of course, although not exclusively, connected with what their own field of study contains, and in my case, the chapters that made a difference were Rasmus Storm's balanced and profound discussion of static economic perspectives on commercial football, Bjørn Schiermer's comparison between sport and art as social systems, and Karl-Heinrich Bette's analysis of risk sports/extreme sports. The others had their qualities, but I didn't sense in them the aspiration to really develop and contribute to the modern system theoretical approach. Jan-Ove Tangen's chapter on inclusion and exclusion in sport contained similar arguments to what I have read from him before. However, Tangen's role in the establishment of this perspective on sport could not be downplayed, and it is perfectly logical that he is one of contributors of this anthology.

The cases that caught my eye however are interesting in that they all had something new to add to the general theory of systems: Storm, because he shows that the common view of commercial enterprises as profit-maximizing could not easily be extended to European top-level sports. Winning doesn't equal optimal profit. Schiermer, because he situates sport among other fundamental systems of modernity, such as art. His chapter touches upon the most intricate, almost philosophical parts of Luhmann. Bette because he uses the outcome of the functional differentiation of social systems in modernity as his point of departure, in his analysis of risk sport. Such historically recent sports don't easily fall into this or that system – especially not common sport, since many of them straight out abjure the

competitive element[2] – which from a Luhmannian perspective makes them interesting. Risk sports also, again with words of Schiermer, are ‘terra incognita for Luhmann’. To view sport as a fundamentally competitive practice is a double-edged sword, since it rules out so much of that which is also referred to as sport. In Bette’s case this weakness is used creatively.

All in all, and as the concluding commentary by John Hoberman admits, each of the individual contributions has its value, and perhaps that is the foremost quality of the anthology. Save for the chapters that I found especially palatable, Luhmann’s existence in sport academia is still uncertain. What is also uncertain is what lies behind the strange fact that there are only male contributors to the volume. Are there really no female sport scholars using the modern system theoretical approach?

To conclude this review, I once again turn to Hoberman’s commentary, which also, like this review, is cautiously positive. Hoberman doubts that Luhmann’s complex terminology will fall into good ground among sport scholars, and questions whether or not it is the Luhmannian approach in each of the chapters that determines their high quality. Somewhat sweepingly, Hoberman claims to represent an American perspective, from which Luhmann allegedly does not appear that impressive. He also asserts that the application of Luhmann’s system theories on sport tells us nothing about nationality and the performance-fetish of doping that dehumanizes and turns athletes into machines. However, Luhmann in a sense gets the last word, since Hoberman could be seen as someone active in the system of sport studies, i.e. concerned with the autopoiesis of the same, that views the emergent perspective as threat to its communication. The very perspective that he is critical of, neatly demonstrates exactly what it is constructed to describe. So, what does that make me (a fourth-order observer), observing Hoberman (third-order observer) observing the Germanian sport scholars (second-order observers) observing the athletes (first-order observers)? I don’t know, but modern system theory seems to offer useful theoretical tools for untangling complexities in both sport studies and the reflexivity of scholars.

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[1] Cf. Wolfe, Cary (2009). *What is Posthumanism*. Univ. Of Minnesota Press; Bryant, Levi R. (2011) *Democracy of Objects*. MPublishing, University of Michigan Library; [http://english.colorado.edu/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/NonhumanTurn\\_CFP.pdf](http://english.colorado.edu/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/NonhumanTurn_CFP.pdf) (available 20111206).

[2] *Understanding Lifestyle sports - consumption, identity, and difference*. Belinda Wheaton (ed.) (2004). Routledge.

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