

Introduction

“That which cannot be conceived through anything else must be conceived through itself” (Luhmann, 2012a, p. 7). Niklas Luhmann’s *magnum opus* of sociological systems theory, *Theory of Society*, is curiously prefaced by the second axiom from Spinoza’s *Ethics*. Curiously, because Luhmann, usually read as a positivist structuralist in the tradition of Talcott Parsons, is not known for his Spinozist predilections. Luhmann’s Spinozist epigraph hints at a secret, a hidden philosophical depth and playfulness, a concern with immanence, contingency, and multiplicity only superficially concealed by the dry formalism of his systems theory. The arguments developed in this book will unfold from a journey into the hinterland of Luhmann’s thought. Placed at the beginning of *Theory of Society*, Spinoza’s second axiom seems to be both the declaration of a theoretical program and an analytical call to action: start on the inside, for it is only from the inside that we can begin to understand anything. This theoretical program is immediately reminiscent of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s call to “see things in the middle, rather than looking down on them from above or up at them from below, or from left to right or right to left” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 23), repeated insistently in the opening pages of *A Thousand Plateaus*. “[T]ry it,” they urge the reader, and “you’ll see that everything changes” (p. 23). How could a book on Luhmann and Deleuze then not follow the calls of both of its protagonists, and indeed start from the middle, from the inside of the arguments it develops?

This book employs the theories of Deleuze and Luhmann to develop a political theory of twenty-first-century democratic politics. The book generates a novel Deleuzian-Luhmannian lens to explore how contemporary democratic politics operates at the intersection of institutional processes, citizens, and their perceptions and needs, how this functioning is conditioned by the

capitalist societies which situate democratic politics, and which continuities and changes mark the socio-evolutionary history of modern democracy. An obvious discontinuity that has recently received much attention from political theorists and public commentators alike is the rising popularity of right-wing populism in many established democracies, from the United States to the United Kingdom, Germany, and Italy, often fueled by conspiracy theories and counterfactual claims to an extent that has earned it the label of “post-truth” politics. The Deleuzian-Luhmannian political theory developed in this book hopes to provide valuable insight into the contemporary appeal of this post-truth populism, and to unpack the underlying shift in the functioning of contemporary politics it signals. But it also draws out its functional continuity with a modern politics whose operational hinge has always been, and is still, the provision of collective steering.

Following Luhmann’s and Deleuze’s shared theoretical programs, this book explores politics from the middle, from the inside of its own operativity. It draws out how the *raison d’être* of modern politics lies in authoritative worldmaking against a complex multiplicity of alternative worlds—in the expression of power that shapes the social world inhabited and experienced by subjects. While Luhmann (2002) uses David Easton’s (1957) classical political science definition of collectively binding decision making to capture the steering function of politics, Deleuze and Guattari, in *Anti-Oedipus* (1983), describe political steering as the overcoding centrally performed by the despotic machine of the modern state. Deciding on the particular world to be produced allows politics to reproduce itself as the authoritative center of the political community. But when neoliberal capitalism, with its deterritorialized flows and atomized, functionally differentiated systems, becomes the dominant mode of social organization, it alters social conditions away from the hierarchical centralization that the political system’s despotic machine requires to operate. Politics, under these conditions, can no longer adequately understand, let alone control, the social flows it is supposed to govern (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, pp. 222–228; Luhmann, 2002, p. 110; 1990, p. 102). As Deleuze writes in his “Post-script on the Societies of Control,” the institutional centers of modern society, including those of democratic politics, “are finished” (1992a, p. 4).

This lack of directly effective steering capacity constitutes a lethal threat for a contemporary democratic politics, which sustains its claim to power by continuously demonstrating the former. The consequence, however, is not the end of modern democracy, with recent populist upheavals heralding its disintegration. On the contrary, viewed through this book’s

Deleuzian-Luhmannian lens, the rise of post-truth populism must rather be understood as the symptom of democratic politics' functional adaptation. Under conditions of neoliberal capitalism, which the "post-mortem despotism" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, p. 228) of liberal democracy can no longer effectively control, it becomes a *politics of orientation* that continues modern politics with different means. This book introduces the idea of a politics of orientation to describe a form of democratic politics in which authority and legitimacy rest not on whether and how political actors shape or propose to shape society through effective decision making but on the means of "contingency control" (Luhmann, 2002, p. 68) and "uncertainty absorption" (Luhmann, 1993b, p. 530) they offer the citizens of complex, deterritorialized democracies.

Orientation is here used in a manner similar to Kant's understanding of orientation as a grounding *intuition* that allows individuals to locate, fix, and distinguish objects, and thereby determine their own position in the world (Kant, 1992, pp. 382, 403).¹ However, beyond Kant, complexity-reducing orientation does not only condition spatial distinctions but performs an ontological condensation and placing that allows subjects and societies to perceive themselves and the world they inhabit in a more general sense. Orientation, in this book, is further not an intrinsic capacity of the human mind but rather the dedicated objective and product of psychic and social processes that evolved for the very purpose of ensuring that subjects and societies are steadily supplied with orientation. Twenty-first-century democratic politics will in the following be unpacked as one such processual apparatus.

A politics of orientation sustains its position as society's steering authority by guiding subjects on how to make sense of this world, and of their own position within it, by offering problem diagnoses, value systems, narratives, and explanatory frameworks. Populism, post-truth politics, and conspiracy theories thrive under these conditions because they are particularly effective in offering complexity-reducing orientation for sense-making. While there is no easy way out of a democratic politics that social conditions have geared toward the provision of orientation, such a politics is not exhausted in the post-truth populism that currently shapes its appearance. The challenge this Deleuzian-Luhmannian political theory will leave the reader with is that of imagining a democratic politics of orientation.

Having covered the middle, it is time to return to the beginning. To readers of both Deleuze and Luhmann, the above sketch of the book's political theory might seem similarly foreign. In order to develop it, it is first necessary to embark on the conceptual and ontological journey of

reading Luhmann and Deleuze together. While this book certainly contains comparative moments, its aim is not a theoretical comparison between the philosophical worlds of Deleuze and Luhmann that reveals hitherto unexplored parallels and common grounds. The book certainly renders visible multiple points of contact between Luhmann and Deleuze, but only as they are already being put to work in a process that Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, in his work on both thinkers, describes as theoretical “folding” (2013, p. 60). Folding aims at neither comparison nor synthesis but rather at the creative genesis of a theoretical third no longer purely Deleuzian or Luhmannian. “The encounter itself defines the point of view, the perspective” (p. 60) established in a process of folding which, for each theory enfolded, takes place “inside, in the system, yet draw[s] space *from* outside, from the environment” (p. 60; original emphasis).

The theoretical folds this book generates around concepts central to the works of both thinkers—time, the event, difference, and multiplicity/complexity—are held together by a hinge: the concept of sense. Of all the concepts discussed and enfolded in the following, their theories of sense are where Deleuze and Luhmann come closest.² Both thinkers conceptualize sense as the medium and mechanism of worldmaking. Subjective selves and worlds are continuously made and remade in sense. Again, inside and middle are of vital importance here. Sense-making is thoroughly immanent; it has no ground outside of always-already made relations of sense and expresses nothing but new sense, which can then once again serve as the conditioned ground for future sense-making. While sense-making always draws on both material and epistemic constituents, their shaping power is here secondary to their synthetic enfolding in sense. Sense-relations thus charge their own reproduction against the co-constituted potentiality of nonsense or not (yet) actualized sense. Self-production in sense oscillates between emergent order in time, which allows for the making of stable selves and worlds, and a perpetually returning evental rupture, from which sense is remade in identical or changed fashion. Order in sense thus functions self-productive only insofar as it constantly renders itself precarious.

With Deleuze, and even more explicitly with Luhmann, this theory of self-grounding, self-rupturing, and ultimately self-reproductive sense must be thought not only as ontology but also as social theory. Not only subjective consciousness, but also the mechanisms, structures, and interactions of social life are sense-based. Capitalism’s machinic logic has created societies that are subject to a dense network of multiple disjointed flows, populated by subjects and social systems which can only be understood

from the inside, or the middle, of their own sense relations. Subjects and social systems operate and reproduce themselves within their own logic of sense. They cannot conceive of anything outside of themselves other than as threatening, deterritorialized complexity, but are yet forced to continuously expose themselves to this complexity to fulfill the multiple demands these societies place on them. It is under these conditions, which Luhmann terms functional differentiation, and Deleuze describes as societies of control, that collectively steering politics becomes a politics of orientation—both because it cannot sufficiently understand the workings of the economy, law, or the nonhuman environment to produce effective governance, and because the public demand it responds to is one for complexity-reducing re-territorialization and re-coding more than it is one for effective social steering.

The Critical Luhmann

The arguments and explorations developed in this book rest on the assumption that an enfolding of Deleuze's and Luhmann's ideas is not only theoretically productive, but, more fundamentally, plausible in the first place. This founding assumption is already contentious. From the time of Luhmann's early publications in the 1960s and 1970s up to the contemporary reception of his thought, the relationship between his writings and the tradition of critical theory, in which Deleuze's work is situated, read, and applied, has been marked by tension and mutual rejection (Kim, 2015, pp. 356–357). In his lifetime, Luhmann encountered critical theory primarily in the form of the Frankfurt School, and in Jürgen Habermas more closely than any other of its representatives. Luhmann and Habermas were the two grand social theorists of postwar German academia. Their dislike for the respective other's theoretical project is obvious. However, they nevertheless mutually and amicably recognized the scope and quality of the other's work. As a contemporary observer notes, the Habermas-Luhmann debate was “far from being the kind of trench warfare that the Adorno-Popper controversy certainly was” (Sixel, 1976, p. 185). Indeed, Habermas and Luhmann made “every effort to listen to and learn from what the other” (p. 185) had to say. Luhmann himself respectfully acknowledges the “pointed, nuanced and very differentiated” (1971b, p. 291; my translation) character of Habermas's critique.

Early on in their respective careers, Luhmann and Habermas even co-authored a publication, *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie: Was leistet die Systemtheorie?* (1971), which unfolds a debate on the mer-

its and limitations of a systems theoretic account of society. Against the background of his own critical theory of communicative action, Habermas, in his contribution to the volume, accuses Luhmann of a functional determinism that eradicates individual agency. Because Luhmann's systems theory removes the category of the subject from the creative process of communicative expressions, his theory, according to Habermas, renders deliberative emancipation and social transformation categorically impossible (Habermas, 1971, pp. 238–278). All communication can do, in Luhmann, is uncritically reproduce the constructions of its own making. Ultimately, Habermas cannot accept that Luhmann's theory “need not and does not sell itself to praxis via legitimation nor does it reflect on it” (Sixel, 1976, p. 194). Habermas's matter-of-fact critique remains mainly focused on the workings Luhmann's systems theory. The criticism Luhmann received for his technocratic mannerisms and apparent aloofness toward pressing social issues from other Frankfurt School thinkers, and their students, was often harsher, more personal—and did not stop at *ad hominem* attacks, both figurative and literal (Brunkhorst, 2012; Brunczel, 2010, p. 220). Friends and colleagues recall the empty classrooms Luhmann was teaching to in the politicized early 1970s, an incident involving flour and eggs thrown at the lectern, as well as enduring gossip about the supposed right-wing political sympathies of Luhmann, who avoided party-political affiliations throughout his lifetime (Kruckis, 1999).³

More contemporary critics draw out parallels between Luhmann's society of functionally differentiated systems and the emergent, self-regulating neoliberal economy to brand Luhmann as a theoretical apologist, if not herald, of neoliberalism (Malowitz and Selk, 2015; Bröckling, 2016). Other scholars focus on how Luhmann's theory remains “up to its ears stuck in the covert which is the problem of subjectivity” (Ternes, 1999, p. 131) and other Enlightenment remnants, but chooses to ignore the questions of power, legitimacy, and resistant agency associated with these (see also: Ashenden, 2006; Lange, 2005). In its general academic reception, Luhmann's work remains framed as analytically positivist and politically conservative. Luhmann himself certainly did not help himself here. His published works and public speeches include frequent mocking remarks on critical theory, above all directed at the “confident provinciality of the Frankfurt School” (Luhmann, 1992, p. 51, quoted in Dammann, 1999, p. 27; see also Luhmann, 1991a). With the exception of Habermas, Althusser, and Marx, Luhmann dismissed critical theory as analytically simplistic and overly moralizing (Laueremann, 1999; August, 2021, p. 355). Even more gravely, he suggests that the normative

certainty and superiority underpinning (Frankfurt School) critical theory should be regarded as the true hallmark of conservatism (Luhmann, 1991; Esposito, 2017, p. 23). It reproduces notions of ontological essentialism and universal moral judgment which, for Luhmann, have no place in a social theory fit to provide insight into the particular society it is embedded in.

For Luhmann, such theorizing can happen only from the inside, and thus requires a recognition of its epistemological perspectivism and limitations. Luhmann's rejection of the normative certainty underpinning Frankfurt School critical theory echoes criticisms put forward by poststructuralist thinkers, including Foucault's and Deleuze's discussion of Marxist theory in "Intellectuals and Power" (1977). Luhmann, on the surface, advocates for abandoning the notion of critique in favor of the analytically more "useful" theory of second-order observation (Luhmann, 1991a, p. 4) in a manner reminiscent of Bruno Latour's infamous "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" (2004). However, at a closer look, Luhmann does in fact not reject the theoretical project of critique altogether but rather seeks to replace the Frankfurt School's narrowly defined, normative critique with a more encompassing, postfoundational critical analytical attitude. Luhmann comes closest to defining what his own critical project could look like at the very end of *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie?*

By way of a concluding remark, he suggests that "the better option" for social theory was always "to keep hold of theoretical insecurity in terms of approach and methodical proceedings" (Luhmann, 1971b, p. 404; my translation). This theoretical insecurity, for Luhmann, "might be the condition for all possibilities of controlling political implications" (p. 404). Reflecting on his methodological remarks, as if to correct Habermas's reading of his theory, Luhmann stresses that he does "regard them as critical" (p. 405), even if it is unclear whether such a methodological and political "function of insecurity" (p. 405) will prove theoretically durable. Luhmann makes a case for a mode of theorizing that embraces contingency and ontological insecurity to capture, and retain, an open-ended potentiality that safeguards against political oppressiveness. It is in this sense that Elena Esposito identifies Luhmann's theoretical perspective as a project of *critical observation* that

looks for the contingency (improbability) of what evolution led us to regard as normal and not surprising [. . .]. What is familiar to us could not be there or be different, depending on social conditions that can themselves be observed. Critical observation, which looks for the conditions that make these improbabilities

normal . . . is observation of society within society. From this perspective, sociological systems theory could be seen somehow provocatively as the most accomplished form of the critical attitude—a reflexive form of critique. (Esposito, 2017, p. 24)

In recent years, a small but significant body of scholarship has taken on the task of exploring, rendering visible, and making use of the critical potential of Luhmann's theory. Under the label of "critical systems theory," a number of scholars are leading "Niklas Luhmann's unmanned flying object back to earth after its blind flight above the clouds and the volcanoes of Marxism" (Fischer-Lescano, 2012, p. 10), drawing out synergy effects between Luhmann's theory of functional differentiation and Marxist critiques of neoliberal automation and alienation (Amstutz and Fischer-Lescano, 2013; Siri and Möller, 2016; Dias Minhoto, 2017; Overwijk, 2021; Daly, 2004; Procyshyn, 2017; Cordero et al., 2017). The larger part of this new critical Luhmann scholarship, which seeks to free Luhmann's ideas from the shackles of their conservative-positivist canonization, however rereads his theory as a postfoundational critique (Wolff, 2021; August, 2021; Konings, 2018; Kim, 2015; Opitz and Tellmann, 2015; Moeller, 2017, 2012; Borch, 2005; Teubner, 2001; Rasch, 1997, 2000; Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2011, 2013; Stäheli, 2000).

This book will use the label "postfoundational" to qualify both Luhmann's and Deleuze's scholarship as well as the theory produced from their speculative enfolding. Postfoundationalism is here not used to signify membership of a particular "school of thought" but rather to qualify a philosophical line of investigation. For the context of this book, postfoundationalism will be understood in Oliver Marchart's sense as characterizing scholarship where "the primordial (or ontological) absence of an ultimate ground is itself the condition of possibility of grounds as present" (Marchart, 2007, p. 15). In other words, this book presumes that absolute grounds are impossible in the works of both Luhmann and Deleuze, but that the question of how and in which form the contingent grounds of the social that fill this ontological void are made and remade is of central concern for both thinkers—as it is for the political philosophy that the author draws from their scholarship.

Many of the existing works dedicated to a "postfoundational Luhmann" unpack relations of kinship between Luhmann's ideas and the thought of Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, or Laclau. This book starts from the presumption that a particularly productive Luhmannian encounter is so far missing from this list: the one between Deleuze and Luhmann.⁴ This absence is peculiar

insofar as a number of Luhmann scholars seem well aware of the “virtually unresearched” (Müller, 2012a, p. 268) congruence of Deleuze’s and Luhmann’s conceptual worlds, which evolve around ideas of creative differentiation, sense, and time (Müller, 2012b, p. 74). While I have made it clear what kind of Luhmann will encounter Deleuze in the following—Luhmann, the postfoundational philosopher—the *conceptual persona* of Deleuze that will meet Luhmann has yet to be characterized. I believe that three of his general “character traits” should be made explicit here, which every chapter will flesh out further through the concept that forms its theoretical hinge—sense, self/world, time, event, and politics. First, the work of this book’s Deleuzian conceptual persona is not only an ontology with political implications but also a political theory (Widder, 2008, 2012; Connolly, 2014; Patton, 2000; Lundborg, 2009; Buchanan and Thoburn, 2008).

Deleuze, as read here, does not only help us to envision a world in which we think and act differently, but is chiefly concerned with how power and control can prevent or facilitate living otherwise. While most of his political readers, such as Nathan Widder, Paul Patton, and William Connolly, turn to Deleuze for a contribution to radical democratic thinking, this book, with the help of Luhmann, employs Deleuze’s thought for a critical analysis of the political present. This book’s Deleuze is thus secondly an analyst of structural continuity as much as he is a thinker of revolutionary change (Lundy, 2013; Zourabichvili, 2012, 2017; Patton, 1997). Finally, the Deleuze of this book dwells on the surface of sense, not in the depth of matter—he reads more Nietzsche than he does Bergson or Spinoza. This book aligns itself with scholarship where Deleuze’s philosophy does not unfold from an ontological source but is postfoundational in a “thick” sense, undoing any notion of ontological primacy (Zourabichvili, 2012; Clisby, 2015; Widder, 2008). The surface philosophy of this Deleuzian conceptual persona unfolds through sense, time, and the event. Matter, bodies, and their affective responses make and shape productive relations but hold no privileged position or relevance for creative becoming, which sets this book’s Deleuze apart from—broadly understood—materialist readings of his work (DeLanda, 2006; Massumi, 2011; Braidotti, 2006; Grosz, 2017).

In reading Luhmann and Deleuze together, this book hence enters a theoretical terrain which, while not completely unmarked, has so far remained largely untreaded. Before its journey can even begin, this book hence needs to find a way around the obvious distance between Luhmann’s sterile, highly formalistic account of a society comprised of functionally differentiated systems and Deleuze, the postfoundational philosopher who

postulates the benefits of being “a little alcoholic, a little crazy” (Deleuze, 1990, p. 157) to escape the socioeconomic confinement of thought, and whose philosophy—especially in his collaboration with Guattari—unfolds in obscure images, colorful narratives, and the occasional vulgarity. This distance will be bridged here with an emphasis on Deleuze’s sobriety and Luhmann’s humor.

Deleuze’s Sobriety, Luhmann’s Humor

Various passages of Deleuze’s work with Guattari stress the value of sobriety for critical-transformative thought. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari insist that linear, arborescent social and epistemic structures cannot be distorted through mere “typographical, lexical or even syntactical cleverness” (1987, p. 6). To stimulate transformation, a dynamic multiplicity “must be made, not by always adding a higher dimension, but rather in the simplest way, by dint of sobriety” (p. 6). “Sobriety, sobriety” is thus “the common prerequisite for the deterritorialization of matters, the molecularization of materials and the cosmicization of forces” (p. 344). Deleuze and Guattari detect such a methodological use of sobriety in the writings of Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett (1986, pp. 19–34). Here, sobriety is used as a literary means of de-personalization. It prepares the ground for a becoming-other that can escape capitalism’s machinic subjection to socioeconomic production (Bogue, 2003, pp. 10–11).

What could be more apt to describe Luhmann’s writing than the term sobriety? On the one hand, there is Luhmann’s public persona, recounted by his contemporaries in the retrospective *Gibt es eigentlich den Berliner Zoo noch?* (1999). They paint the picture of a theorist who works with “assiduity beyond every tiredness” (Souto, 1999, p. 55; my translation) but who “was not one of those figures who made it easy for their environment to find, beyond their professional role, access to a more personal background. On the contrary. Great personal distance and aloofness, the consistent narrowing of conversations to more general topics characterized his nature” (Kieserling, 1999, p. 45; my translation). The Luhmann who emerges from these and similar accounts is dry, technocratic, always friendly but strictly professional in his exchanges with students and colleagues. One of his former colleagues recounts an episode where Luhmann was evidently appalled at the insinuation that his writings contained “funny examples” (Rammstedt, 1999, p. 19; my translation). “Where are they?” (Luhmann, quoted in Rammstedt,

1999, p. 19), he is recalled to have responded, “Something like this must be removed immediately” (p. 19).

This public persona fits well with the style of Luhmann’s writing, infamous for its lifeless technicality. In *The Radical Luhmann*, Hans-Georg Moeller dedicates a whole chapter to the question of why Luhmann “wrote such bad books” (2012, p. 10), unpacking Luhmann’s “extremely dry, unnecessarily convoluted, poorly structured, highly repetitive, overly long, and aesthetically displeasing texts” (p. 10). The central explanation that Moeller offers “for the forbidding nature of Luhmann’s style” (p. 12) is the peculiarity of his theoretical project. While explicitly formulated as a sociological theory,⁵ Moeller (pp. 12–14) argues that Luhmann’s work is in fact intended as a philosophical super-theory in the tradition of Kant and Hegel, whose stylistic formalism and propensity for length and theoretical heaviness Luhmann therefore adopts (see also: Rasch, 2013). I would like to propose a different, more Deleuzian, explanation for Luhmann’s “bad” writing: a methodological sobriety that functions in combination with Luhmann’s rupturing humor.

Most accounts of Luhmann’s personality and his writing are of a certain schizophrenic quality. They illustrate the aforementioned dryness but in combination with reporting Luhmann’s humor, his “enjoyment of political incorrectness or even joyful cynicism” that spanned “the complete scale of humorous communication from the mocking of classical references that require an educated audience to the merciless dullness of the corniest jokes” (Kruckis, 1999, pp. 48–49; my translation). An example famous amongst Luhmann scholars is the research plan he produced upon request when joining the newly founded faculty of sociology at the University of Bielefeld in 1969: “the theory of society; term: thirty years; costs: none” (Luhmann, 2012a, p. xi). It seems as if the theorist Luhmann deliberately endowed his social systems theory with a matching author persona that bracketed other parts of his personality, but from which he occasionally distanced himself through humorous remarks. Such remarks make regular appearances in Luhmann’s writing, calling into question how serious the outrage was that Rammstedt recounts above.

Often hidden in footnotes or made in passing, Luhmann’s humorous interjections reveal him as a sharp, critical observer of philosophical trends and social conditions who anarchically ridicules dogmatic in an almost Nietzschean fashion.⁶ On one occasion, Luhmann chooses to begin an invited talk on business ethics with the words: “I have to say it right at the beginning: I did not succeed in finding out what I am actually supposed to

talk about. The thing has a name: business ethics. And a secret, which is its rules. But I assume that this phenomenon is similar to the *raison d'état* or the English cuisine, which appear in the form of a secret because they need to hide the fact that they actually don't exist" (Luhmann, 2008a, p. 196). On the topic of religion, Luhmann observes that in order to achieve a social ordering system of similar effectiveness, "it would be necessary to combine Marxism with drug addiction but attempts at this have not turned out convincing so far" (2000, p. 127).

Against the background of Luhmann's humor, the dry aloofness of his writing and public persona appear consciously crafted—an artificiality that renders apparent the contingency behind its own, and thereby all, constructed order. Such a reading of Luhmann's stylistic sobriety fits well with how Luhmann's contemporary André Kieserling describes his style of lecturing. According to Kieserling, Luhmann "cultivated the artificiality of his whole project so clearly that nobody would be deterred from disagreeing by the lecture itself" (1999, p. 57). Reminiscent of Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre, where the action on stage is made to seem distant through a range of dramatic devices, from a lacking display of emotion by the actors on stage to encouraging the audience to smoke and talk during the play, deployed to make the tragedy played out on stage seem contingent and thus avoidable, I suggest that Luhmann's stylistic sobriety performatively reveals the artificiality, contingency, and variability of all social order, which lies at the heart of his theoretical project. To use a Deleuzian term, it functions dramatizing (Deleuze, 1967). Dramatization in Deleuze begins with distinct concepts and explores the dynamic problems that lie behind and exceed them. Uncovering "the dynamic spatio-temporal determinations (the differential relations) that constitute the terrain of the Idea" (MacKenzie and Porter, 2011, p. 489), dramatization reveals not only that the world we inhabit could be actualized in very different ways but also recovers the potentiality to perform such divergent actualizations. Together with his rupturing humor, Luhmann's sober *conceptual persona* dramatizes the concept of order.⁷ Nothing in Luhmann's society of autopoietically closed but functionally unstable systems is ever essential or determinate. All order is contingently self-produced against the background of a chaotic multiplicity of alternatives, and temporary; things could always be radically otherwise.

While it takes a second glance to recognize the humorous quality of Luhmann's work, Deleuze explicitly mobilizes the rupturing purchase of humor in his critical philosophy. In "Coldness and Cruelty," Deleuze opposes the humorous, productive contractualism of the masochist to the

ironic, dissective legalism of the sadist. Both seek to overcome the realm of conventional law. But due to its ironic inversion of the law, the anti-legal anarchy that the sadist desires ultimately functions as a constitutive outside which only reproduces the law's validity. "Sade often stresses the fact that the law can only be transcended toward an institutional model of anarchy," Deleuze writes (1991, p. 87). The issue is that "anarchy can only exist in the interval between two regimes based on laws, abolishing the old to give birth to the new" (p. 87). On the contrary, the logic of masochism is humorous, chaotic, and creative. "[I]nseparable from an attempt to overturn [. . .] authority" (Deleuze, 1991, p. 130), humorous masochism does not just invert the dialectic relationship between master and slave while leaving its logic intact. Its dramatizing enactment rather dissolves the dialectic itself by creatively opening up alternative relational connections.

For Deleuze, irony operates on the basis of an accurate common sense, ridiculing false diversions through exaggerated inversion to, in the end, arrive at a reproduction of this common sense. Humor, on the contrary, does not require or contain assumptions about "rightness." It opens up the rupturing intensity of chaos, freeing singularities from their representative confinement by distorting the dialectic opposition between sense and nonsense. "[I]f irony is the co-extensiveness of being with the individual, or of the I with representation, humor is the co-extensiveness of sense with nonsense" (Deleuze, 1990, p. 157). The philosophical opponent whom Deleuze targets with his humorous philosophy is Hegel, and his synthetic resolution of contradictions. For Deleuze, dialectic synthesis reproduces the philosophical—and political—status quo and eradicates every possibility for divergent creative production.⁸ Deleuze opposes the dialectic annihilation of difference with a humorous philosophy that "does not attempt to resolve contradictions, but to make it so that there are none, and there never were any" (p. 11; see also: Deleuze, 1994, pp. 171–189). Humor dismantles the dialectic functionality of philosophical, economic, and political order to open up the chaotic multiplicity of alternative relational connections. If brought into contact with epistemic or social relations, this creative potentiality can bring about actual change in the order of the world we inhabit (Ionica, 2016).

That both Luhmann and Deleuze employ a combination of sobriety and humor to expose the contingency of order, and the chaotic multiplicity behind it, does, however, not mean that order and chaos have exactly the same status in their theories. Luhmann seems content to highlight the unlikelihood and contingency of order through humorous cracks in the sobriety of his writing and his public persona. He neither targets a particular social

order nor implies that a different kind of order should be made following his deconstruction of the ordering principles that make the world as it is. Luhmann is not a revolutionary, and while the idea that things do not have to be the way they are is central to his work, they never amount to the demand, or political call to action, that things should be different. Deleuze, on the contrary, weaponizes humor and sobriety to actively challenge and disrupt the doxa of philosophy and the machinic workings of capitalist society.

Following the example of the “writing machine[s]” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, p. 32) of Beckett, Burroughs, and Kafka, Deleuze’s philosophy aims to “plug into” (p. 48) systems of order to rewire our understanding of them, and to encourage readers to challenge the status quo upheld by their public acceptance. Different from Luhmann, Deleuze’s ideas are intended to function as revolution. Acknowledging this difference in philosophical intent, this book suggests that much can nonetheless be gained from exploring the common ground of Deleuze’s and Luhmann’s work: an ontology and a social theory in which chaos is the norm, and order the contingent, fragile, and laboriously upheld exception.

Structure of the Book

The Deleuzian-Luhmannian political philosophy of this book will be developed through an exploratory enfolding of both theories intended to push each “deeper into its creative potential” (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2013, p. 60) and unlock ideas and arguments that remain inaccessible through their isolated engagement. For Luhmann, this enfolding aims to recover his work from the theoretical “ossification” (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2013, p. 63) to which its positivist-analytical reception, especially in the Anglo-American academy, has led. While most of the recent critical writings on Luhmann focus on laying out the analytical program for a critical Luhmannian systems theory, this book aims to go one step further, and politically apply the critical Luhmannian theory unlocked through the unfolding with Deleuze. Equivalent to what Esposito (2011; Esposito and Stark, 2019) and Konings (2018) have performed for the context of a financialized economy, and Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos (2006, 2011, 2014) for the realm of law, this book aims to make Luhmann’s thought useful as a lens for critical political analysis.

The critical potential of Deleuze’s work of course requires no unlocking. It is the central driving force behind Deleuze’s writing as well as behind

the reception of his work. For Deleuze, the creative potentiality unlocked through the enfolding with Luhmann is hence not political critique but rather sociopolitical analysis.⁹ In Deleuzian scholarship, the political potential of his theory is, for the most part, utilized for abstract theoretical explanations of where political potentiality is located within contemporary societies stratified by capitalism (Widder, 2012; Buchanan, 2008; Patton, 2000), of how resistance can generate or access it (Braidotti, 2006; 2013; Massumi, 2002, 2011), and of how we are to create a more radical, more open democracy from doing so (Connolly, 2014; Patton, 2005; Schrift, 2000).¹⁰ Rarely does Deleuze's theory inform a detailed sociopolitical investigation of whatever forms the focal point of the political critique put forward. Where such a Deleuzian political analysis is developed, it is highly specific, both in terms of the aspects of Deleuze's work made use of, and regarding the social phenomenon under investigation, for instance algorithmic governance in Deleuze's digitalized societies of control (Celis Bueno, 2020; Galloway, 2004, 2012; MacKenzie and Porter 2019) or the machinic stratification of events through media coverage (Lundborg, 2015, 2009; Patton, 1997).

Through the enfolding with Luhmann's systems theory, which offers a meticulously detailed account different social systems in their particular functioning and social couplings, this book renders Deleuze's critical philosophy useful as a lens for sociopolitical analysis, and applies the former to the functioning of twenty-first-century democracy. While such an overarching Deleuzian analysis of contemporary democratic politics covers new ground for Deleuze scholars, I hope it will also showcase how analytically well-equipped, powerful, and practically useful the "tool box" (Deleuze and Foucault, 1977, p. 208) of Deleuze's philosophy is to a wider audience of political theorists and social scientists that might have so far dismissed the former as (nothing but) abstract, jargon-heavy postfoundational ontology.

This book's enfolding of Deleuze's and Luhmann's theories is not completely even, and cannot be performed without some tearing and bending. The following chapters will not draw on Deleuze and Luhmann to an equal extent. Some folds might be more Deleuzian than Luhmannian, some vice versa, and some require the abrupt departure from the trajectory of one theory to refold toward the other. To smooth the process, this book will enfold not only the thought of Luhmann and Deleuze but also the works of thinkers who have directly informed, or echo in, the writings of both: Leibniz, Husserl, Nietzsche, Whitehead, and Marx. The process of enfolding Deleuze's and Luhmann's already in themselves unwieldy, and in many ways radically different, works nevertheless requires a certain amount of

theoretical force, some speculative pushing, and interpretive pulling of both theories. As Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos suggests, the “effect might be one of estrangement for both Luhmann and Deleuze scholars” (2013, p. 61). The creative potentiality uncovered in both theories through this enfolding, I hope, justifies the occasional use of theoretical force. Such use of force is at least not foreign to the scholars on whom it is being exercised. Luhmann adopts the conceptual framework of Talcott Parsons’s systems theory but turns it on its head to produce a postfoundational social philosophy that bears little resemblance to the former. Deleuze, on his part, considered himself a traitor to the authors who inspired his work (Kedem, 2011; Bryant, 2008) but argues that such treacherous philosophizing is preferable to acting as the “interpretive priest” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 114) of the philosophical canon. For new philosophical habits to be formed, old ones must be broken first.

This book is split into two parts. The first part develops a Deleuzian-Luhmannian ontology that identifies ungrounded, self-grounding relations of sense as the mechanism and medium that makes subjects as well as the social worlds they inhabit. The second part unpacks the functioning of politics against the background of this social ontology as self-reproduction through collectively steering decision making. In neoliberal capitalism’s functionally differentiated societies, the only steering that politics can provide for its citizens is orientation for sense-making, which allows populist forces and conspiracy theories that are solely focused on the provision of complexity-reduction to flourish. Chapter 1 will begin the enfolding of Luhmann and Deleuze with the concept on which it is hinged: sense. The first chapter unpacks how both Luhmann and Deleuze, whom the former references directly, conceptualize sense as immanently creative. Sense-relations are ungrounded insofar as they are composed of material and epistemic constituents but exceed them to produce something new that only becomes actual on the surface of sense. The motor of immanently creative sense-making is the complexity or multiplicity of nonsense. Marking the excess of sense rather than its absence, nonsense is the constitutive outside co-produced in every process of sense-making.

Chapter 2 develops an ontological application of immanently creative sense as the mechanism and medium of self- and worldmaking. It argues that self and world emerge as the two sides of one and the same process of open-ended sense-making, which must be directed to be able to generate stable selves and continuous worlds. Chapter 3 unpacks how Luhmann and Deleuze both identify time as the emergent ordering framework that

ensures productive continuity in sense. Because the order of time is, however, also without stable ground, like sense, it requires an in-built reproductive mechanism that keeps it moving. Ordering time is continuously ruptured by the event that allows for its continuation. Chapter 4, which marks the transition from ontology to political theory in the book, shows how this rupturing event functions as the source of both continuity and change, depending on which pathway of sense is actualized from it. In the context of society's sense-relations, the decision on this actualization marks the function of modern politics.

Chapter 5 explores the functional dilemma that a self-reproductive politics focused on this steering provision faces in a capitalist, functionally differentiated society where governmental access to the social realms that require political steering is severely limited. Under these conditions, politics becomes a politics of orientation. A politics of orientation steers societies not through direct worldmaking in sense, but by offering citizens guidance for sustaining their processes of self- and worldmaking, which complex digitalized societies have rendered increasingly precarious. Chapter 6 then unpacks the rise of post-truth politics and populist forces within twenty-first-century democracies as an effect of this functional shift toward a politics of orientation. Beyond existing analyses of post-truth politics, which emphasize their radical break with modern democracy, the Luhmannian-Deleuzian lens of a politics of orientation sheds light on the underlying social-functional continuity between both. However, the shift to a politics of orientation benefits those political forces whose simplistic messages offer the most radical complexity-reduction and thus the most effective orientation—which are, as it stands, the political voices of the populist right.