The Development of Social Structures within a Changing Museum Frame: Discussing Luhmann and Foucault

Jane K. Nielsen

In this paper, German sociologist Niklas Luhmann's theories on social systems will be discussed in connection with Foucault's epistemological definitions and discourse theory to form a more concise interpretation of how social theory has developed within museums. By comparing and contrasting Foucault's and Luhmann's concepts of social structures, it is possible to identify understandings of social movements in museological developments and at the same time approach forthcoming developments in visitor and participatory practices.

Looking at epistemological developments within museum history has often involved examining sociological and philosophical structures as well. Specifically, the development of historical understandings of the establishment of thought and meaning seem to concentrate on social definitions of development. This approach seems natural from a museological perspective, especially as the French philosopher Michel Foucault's epistemological definitions of the Renaissance, Classical and Modern "episteme" have been applied to the historical development of museums.[1] In his definitions, Foucault identified a set of different epistemes or historical periods with their own discourse for knowledge development. Foucault's epistemological definitions are not directly linked to museology. Rather, they are viewed as acknowledged spaces of a given time, but they can also be useful when identifying museological epistemology. Foucault proposed that the way people regarded and managed, for example, the first museum collections, very much depended on how they regarded the world, society and community around them. He was especially interested in principles that were viewed as *accepted* or allowed or could be *thought* at a specific time. Foucault believed it to be of great importance to understand these principles in order to identify and understand the social development of, for example, a museum and indeed how and why collections were managed the way they were. By an "episteme," Foucault meant those techniques, codes, languages, and values that shaped a culture. These principles of knowledge define what was regarded as "acceptable thought" or "the truth" at a specific moment in history.[2]

Foucault is a much-used source when identifying and analysing epistemological perspectives, yet he has also been criticised for promoting a somewhat negative view of museums as Enlightenment institutions that strive to organise and classify learning and social interaction according to universal rules. This criticism is specifically connected to his description of the museum as a heterotopia.[3] For Foucault, the term heterotopia describes spaces that have more layers of meaning or relationships. A heterotopia may be a physical representation of a utopia, such as the world represented in a museum, or a type of parallel space that contains undesirable elements to make a real utopian space possible, such as a prison. The concept of heterotopias that Foucault defined directly in terms of museums posits them as negative and

confusing places, where cultural development is neglected or completely abandoned due to their general tendency to classify and order objects and collections in outdated paradigms. However, as Beth Lord discusses, Foucault's description of the museum as a heterotopia can also promote museums as positive and progressive places, where layers of meaning can engender different understandings and ways of creating relevance.[4] It should be noted that this is the only direct link we have between Foucault's epistemological definitions and museums. Nevertheless, historical and epistemological developments within museums are often treated as connected with Foucault's definitions of epistemes alone, particularly in modern and postmodern aspects of thought. Therefore, it may be useful to examine how social theories of understanding and interpreting meaning have developed as part of museology.[5]

When studying developments of modernism and postmodernism within museum history, we must also look at the social movements and tendencies of past societies and communities. The way objects were collected, how exhibitions evolved, and how knowledge was created from collections were very much influenced by the way society (and indeed the world) was viewed and understood. Naturally, this necessitates examining ideological aspects of thought; in his article *Different Spaces* Foucault actually encourages the concept of a society with many heterotopias, not just to encourage difference, but also to promote spaces for new social developments.[6] Foucault understood progress as a growth of social capabilities and possibilities, not necessarily as historical or cultural advancement alone, nor as the movement towards a specific goal or ideal. Social and individual progress defines which power relations and historical events are regarded as matters of course and therefore as necessities at a given time.[7] They are essentially the rules or laws that are not questioned because they are considered "truth." It is within this type of progress that the historical developments of museums can be identified, future challenges and possibilities can be pinpointed, and where museums can find an individual path to contribute to further social and cultural developments.

Structures of Social Systems

It is possible to further define Foucault's approaches to museum development and change by looking at other theories of social systems. In his discussion of sociological systems theory, Luhmann argues that everything can, in fact, be described in terms of systems.[8] In this definition, society does not consist of people but of a series of communicative sub-systems, each performing a special function. Each system of function has a code of meaning, which holds its origin in a basic value, i.e. a common belief. This belief often structures how a system functions culturally, socially and personally, and can deal with e.g. shared social behaviours or norms, individual developments and wishes, and communication methods such as terminologies used within an organisation, articulations of tasks and responsibilities, and social approaches to individual needs. Luhmann believed that systems communicated with society through these codes of meaning. According to Luhmann, we only have access to the physical world through observation. The moment we begin to observe something, a different belief system is in operation between what we observe and what we do not

observe. In other words, it is not possible to observe something without filtering out something else. According to Luhmann, a system will only understand and use its own code of meaning, and will not understand nor use the code of another system. It is not possible to import the code of one system into another because systems are closed and can only react to things within their environment. Simple examples of these meaning codes include the code of the political system, which can be identified as power/non-power, the health system's code as ill/non-ill, and a military system as peace/non-peace. A meaning code will never have an equal balance between its two definitions; all systems will naturally always strive for the positive aspect of the meaning code. This also means that all meaning codes are essentially subjective because what is regarded as, for example, power or non-power is subject to an individual's subjective thinking.[9]

The difference between the system and its surroundings is what creates identity. Luhmann also believed that systems were characterised by being closed, self-referencing and self-creating; thus, a system will approach its choices and decisions from its own understanding.[10] Consequently, a system can only open up to its surroundings when, through its internal logic, it comes across a disturbance. Disturbances arise when the system is able to reflect upon its own differences in comparison to its surroundings.[11] For museums, such disturbances might come in the shape of specific community engagements, increased visitor influences, fresh research initiatives within their collections, or new communication strategies. The surroundings will always be more complex than the system itself, and the more complex the surrounding world, the greater the opportunity for the system to increase the complexity of its own identity. By observing the surrounding world, the system can grasp an opportunity to increase and develop its own complexity. The difference between a system and the surrounding world is created by communication, and is therefore determined by what the receiver hears and understands. This makes communication essential to all types of learning within the system. The crux of learning thus pivots on how meaning is created in different relations: internally, within an organisation, and externally, between organisations and the surrounding world. Through this definition, Luhmann is offering an almost complete theory: it is not possible to transfer values and knowledge from one human being to another, but it is possible to "free" a system, let it take responsibility and create itself.[12]

This discussion shows that if we view the museum as a closed self-referencing and self-creating system that can only open up to its surroundings by creating a disturbance, then the social development of museum history and epistemology can also be seen as part of a postmodern movement. Within the social constructionist strand of postmodernism, the concepts of social dialogue and the constant exchange of views and opinions become essential. The museum can choose to remain a closed system; however, only when disturbances in the shape of new ideas, inputs, social and cultural changes and constant dialogue with the surrounding world take place will it then be possible to increase the complexity of the museum as a place of social and cultural communication and interaction. The museum, as a social system, must be able to reflect upon its own differences and relevance. These aspects become clearer when examining Luhmann's and Foucault's theories together.

Creating new structures

To further this approach, I believe it is fruitful to connect Luhmann's theories on systems to Foucault's analysis of discourses. Although Luhmann (1927-1998) and Foucault (1926-1984) were contemporaries, and their work generally revolved around many of the same theoretical principles, only occasionally do they refer directly to each other's work. Indeed, it is mainly during the last few decades that more all-encompassing comparisons are drawn in literature between the two theorists.[13] Drawing a closer comparison between Luhmann's definition of systems and Foucault's analysis of discourses allows us to outline a different understanding of the museum as a communicative system.

According to Foucault, "the term discourse can be defined as the group of statements that belong to a single system of formation."[14] This means that each system in its individual formation identifies and refers to its own beliefs and statements with the sole purpose of defining itself. Discourses therefore become a series of statements limited by a system, but only belonging to a single system of formation. The statements discussed within the system, without external influence, will determine the subject. Foucault directs his analysis on discourses towards "the statement" – he defines and analyses these theories in his work *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969).[15] He argues that the core of the discourse is the statement. A discourse analysis therefore requires a closer look at which relations exist between the statements, including their transformation, place and how widely they are spread. A discursive formation is established by defining different types of statements - a sort of policy on how we act within the system. Foucault thereby proposes that "the statement" becomes rules that render an expression, a proposition or an act as discursively meaningful.[16] Once it is transformed into rules, "the statement " is endowed with a very special meaning in Foucault's definition: it is the rules that make an expression or a proposition discursively meaningful, not the statement in itself.

This creates a direct link to Luhmann's definition of the system as closed and self-referencing, and it is possible to see certain shared discursive elements between Luhmann's and Foucault's theories.[17] Discourses are meaning structures that make it possible to determine different meaning elements, such as our shared social and cultural values and our social aspects of thoughts. Discourses are also the result of interventions (direct or indirect) that either connect meaning elements to each other or disconnect them. More importantly, both Luhmann and Foucault argue that an analysis can in itself provoke a suitable disturbance to a social system. This means that a disturbance such as new technological, social, interpretative or cultural impacts may create entirely new sets of values and beliefs that not only challenge the old discourse, but that also may transform it to encompass new meaning structures. This is often the case at museums where major projects, immense refurbishments, or new approaches have formed new interpretive experiences, reached new audiences, or broadened collection research and communication. Furthermore, from a historical context, it is possible to observe and analyse a closed system through potential oppositional systems because they provide a suitable balance for analytical observations.[18]

These definitions become especially relevant in terms of museum communication and

interaction because they state that a museum as a social system can itself create a proper disturbance and therefore question, criticise, and redefine its own relevance within society. A disturbance within such a strong communicative and interpretative system as a museum will undoubtedly set new standards for communication between the museum and other systems, or groups of communities and society. First and foremost, this involves communication and interaction with many different groups of museum visitors. Some museums have been very successful in interacting with different visitor and community groups, engaging in new partnerships and forming new communication facilities around their existing social structures. However, museums are also known to be reluctant towards any form of change and often regard change as a problem. In order for museums to form new theoretical and practical structures of social and interactive development, they must be open to new ways of looking at their essential disciplines: learning, interpretation, research, interaction, and communication. Change or transformation may also require an examination of academic and non-academic disciplines, such as futurology or storytelling, which as yet have not been fully connected to museology. Above all, forming new social structures for future museological development requires museums to open up to both theoretical and practical disturbances that can help them develop their epistemological and social understandings in a fast changing world. In other words, it is within challenges (or disturbances) that social systems such as museums can develop new meaning structures for themselves and their visitors, and at the same time (re-)define themselves as strong, relevant and meaningful institutions in the society in which they exist. Graham Black provides a fitting statement on which to conclude: "Society is changing much faster than we are. We must accept the need for rapid change in museum ethos and practice, even in times of financial hardship, in order to respond to twenty-first century demands – a big challenge for a profession that is notoriously resistant to change. For the necessary change to happen, we must all be futurists now."[19]

1   M. Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 235-240; E. Hooper-Greenhill, Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 12-16.

2   P. Findlen, 'The Museum: Its Classical Etymology and Renaissance Genealogy' in B. S. Carbonell, ed., *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts* (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 23-50; Foucault, The Order of Things, 235-240, 375-399.

3   M. Foucault, 'Different Spaces,' in *Essential Works of Foucault* 1954-1984, Vol. 2, trans. R. Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998) 175-185; B. Lord, 'Foucault's Museum: Difference, Representation, and Genealogy,' *Museum and Society*, March 2006, Vol. 4, no. 1, 1-14; B. Lord, 'Philosophy and the Museum: An Introduction to the Special Issue,' *Museum Management and Curatorship*, Vol. 21, no. 2, 2006, 79-87.

4   Lord, 'Foucault's Museum,' 1-14.

5   For further discussion of Foucault's notion of heterotopia, see *Heterotopian Studies - Michel Foucault's Ideas on Heterotopias*, http://www.heterotopiastudies.com/ (accessed 20 March 2013); R. Duclos, 'Postmodern/Postmuseum: New Directions in Contemporary Museological Critique,' Museological Review, Vol. 1, no. 1, 1994, 1-13; B. Lord, 'Representing Enlightenment Space,' in S. Macleod, ed., *Reshaping Museum Space. Architecture, Design, Exhibitions* (London: Routledge, 2005) 146-157.

6   Foucault, 'Different Spaces,' 175-185.

7   Ibid.; G. E. Hein, 'The Constructivist Museum,' in E. Hooper-Greenhill, ed., *The Educational Role of the Museum* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) 73-79.

8   N. Luhmann, *Social Systems*, trans. John Bednarz, Jr. with Dirk Baecker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) 1-2; C. Borch, *Niklas Luhmann* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

9   Ibid., 59-102.

10 Ibid., 12-58.

11 Ibid., 437-477.

12 Ibid., 176-209, 405-477; Borch, *Niklas Luhmann*, 50-65, 93-133; C. Borch and L.T. Larsen, Perspektiv, Magt og Styring – Luhmann og Foucault til diskussion (Copenhagen: Hans Reitzels Forlag, 2003) 149-179.

13 Borch and Larsen, *Perspektiv, Magt og Styring*; Borch, *Niklas Luhmann*; N. Luhmann, 'Why Does Society Describe Itself as Postmodern?' *Cultural Critique, No. 30, The Politics of Systems and Environments*, Part I, Spring 1995, 171-186.

14 M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, (London: Tavistock Publications Limited, 1972) 107.

15 Ibid., 89-141.

16 Ibid., 89-141.

17 Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 278-356; Borch and Larsen, Perspektiv, Magt og Styring, 149-179.

18 Borch and Larsen, Perspektiv, Magt og Styring, 149-179; Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 89-141; Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 437-477; Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge,* 12-16.

19 G. Black, *Transforming Museums in the Twenty-first Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012) 8.