

Call for Papers

Luhmann Conference 2026

Theme: Meaning. Observed with ...

Venue: Inter-University Centre Dubrovnik, Croatia

Conference dates: 14–18 September 2026

Pre-conference dinner: 14 September 2026

Submission Deadline: 15 May 2026

Conference Theme

Coded as the distinction between actual and potential, meaning (*Sinn*) occupies a central position in Niklas Luhmann's theory programme. As the shared medium in which both psychic and social systems operate, meaning enables observation, selection, and the continuous opening of horizons of possibility. As a medium without an outside (Luhmann, 1995a; 1995b, 62), meaning is notoriously inescapable for meaning-processing observers ([Morales, 2025](#)), and such are the blind spots and paradoxes it entails ([Tække, 2025](#)).

In his major theoretical works, Luhmann (1995b; 2012; 2013) distinguished three dimensions of meaning—the factual (this/that), the temporal (before/after), and the social (ego/alter). Each of these dimensions relates to a distinct sub-theory of his systems-theoretical programme: the factual dimension grounds the theory of social differentiation, the temporal dimension the theory of social evolution, and the social dimension the theory of communication ([Roth 2009; Sohn, 2021](#)). As shown by Andersen ([2003](#)), each of these meaning dimensions moreover corresponds to a dedicated strategy of deparadoxifying the inescapable paradox of observation, while they also allow for analytically differentiating forms of social systems, depending on how meaning is stabilised as semantics and processed across objects, time, and social relations ([Harste, 2021; Jönhill, 2012](#)).

What Luhmann did not adequately address, however, is how these dimensions of meaning come about, and why meaning should be structured into precisely three dimensions rather than more—or fewer ([Roth, 2021](#)). While the triadic architecture of meaning has become canonical in systems theory, its underlying logic remained explicitly unresolved.

More recent contributions have returned to this problem by reconstructing meaning dimensions in relation to the basic questions of observation—such as *what*, *when*, and *who*—and by exploring whether additional questions (*where*, *how*, *why*, and possibly others) may correspond to further, systematically expandable dimensions of meaning ([Roth and Kaczmarczyk, 2026](#)).

Meaning Dimension	Basic Question	Code	Focus
Spatial	<i>Where?</i>	here/there	The locus of observation
Temporal	<i>When?</i>	before/after	The process of observation
Factual	<i>What?</i>	this/that	The object of observation
Social	<i>Who?</i>	ego/alter	The observer
Modal	<i>How?</i>	thus/otherwise	The manner of observation
Motivational	<i>Why?</i>	intent/accident	The purpose of observation
...

Table: Six (or more?) dimensions of meaning as oriented by basic questions, codes, and observational foci (adapted from [Roth and Kaczmarczyk, 2026](#))

From this perspective, Luhmann's triad appears not as a closed architecture but as a reduced form of a broader, potentially open framework for analysing meaning and—tentatively—deparadoxifying the paradox of observation.

Against this backdrop, the Luhmann Conference 2026 invites contributions that revisit, rethink, and extend the concept of meaning under contemporary conditions of complexity. Under the guiding theme *Meaning. Observed with ...*, the conference foregrounds meaning not as a static concept but as a dynamic medium of observation—one that allows for distinctions to be drawn, alternatives to be imagined, and contingency to be processed.

As such, the ellipsis in this year's conference title is intentional. It signals an openness to different observational standpoints, theoretical instruments, and empirical domains. Rather than prescribing a single perspective, the conference asks how meaning is observed, transformed, stabilised, and contested when observed *with* different distinctions, media, and systems.

Key Orientations

Building on ongoing debates within social systems theory and beyond, the conference particularly welcomes contributions engaging with one or more of the following orientations:

- **Meaning and observation:** second-order observation, reflexivity, and the observation of observation in social and psychic systems.
- **Psychic systems, consciousness, personality, and personhood:** renewed engagement with consciousness, sense-making, psychology, psychotherapy, and their relation to identity formation across psychic and social systems.
- **Artificial and technological mediation of meaning:** AI, artificial communication, algorithmic decision premises, and their implications for meaning-processing systems and structures of expectation.
- **Possibility, contingency, and alterity:** forms of meaning that resist closure, reduction, or authoritarian simplification; imagination, counterfactuals, and non-necessary social orders.
- **Meaning and society:** values, polarisation, populism, inter-systemic relations, pathologies of meaninglessness, and strategies of complexity reduction.
- **Expanding architectures of meaning:** theoretical work that revisits or extends established three-dimensional models of meaning, including novel distinctions, questions, or sub-programmes within systems theory.

These themes are not exhaustive. Contributions from sociology, organisation studies, political theory, economics, education, cultural studies, literary studies, communication and media studies, cybernetics, philosophy, and related fields are explicitly encouraged, provided they engage meaning as a central analytical concern.

Aim of the Conference

The conference aims to create a shared space for observing how meaning is currently being observed—and for experimenting with alternative ways of doing so. In this sense, the Luhmann Conference 2026 is conceived as both a continuation of, and an intervention in, contemporary systems-theoretical discourse.

By foregrounding meaning as a medium rather than a settled concept, the conference seeks to stimulate theoretical innovation, empirical exploration, and productive friction across

disciplinary and methodological boundaries. It also marks a step toward a broader reflection on the future directions of Luhmannian scholarship in an era shaped by technological co-evolution and intensified societal complexity.

References:

- Andersen, N.Å. (2003). [The undecidability of decision](#). In Bakken T. and Hernes T. (Eds.) *Autopoietic Organization Theory*. Copenhagen Business School Press.
- Harste, G. (2021). [The Habermas-Luhmann Debate](#). Columbia University Press.
- Jönhill, J. I. (2012). [Inclusion and exclusion—A guiding distinction to the understanding of issues of cultural background](#). *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*, 29(4), 387-401.
- Luhmann, N. (1995a). [The paradox of observing systems](#). *Cultural Critique*, (31), 37-55.
- Luhmann, N. (1995b). *Social systems*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Luhmann, N. (2012). *Theory of Society, Volume 1*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Luhmann, N. (2013). *Theory of Society, Volume 2*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Morales, F. X. (2025). [Self/other: Guiding distinction for the social theory of the self](#). *Current Sociology*, 73(4), 595-612.
- Roth, S. (2009). [New for whom? Initial images from the social dimension of innovation](#). *International Journal of Innovation and Sustainable Development*, 4(4), 231-252.
- Roth, S. (2021). [Draw your organization! A solution-focused theory-method for business school challenges and change](#). *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 34(4), 713-728.
- Roth and Kaczmarczyk (2026). [The questions of observation. Expanding the dimensions of meaning in Niklas Luhmann's theory programme](#). Manuscript, DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.19724.99203.
- Sohn, Y. (2021). [Four pillars of Luhmann's analytical apparatus: Applications for communication research](#). *Studies in Communication Sciences*, 21(2), 207-224.
- Tække, J. (2025). [Cognition as Communication: Exploring Niklas Luhmann's Theory of Knowledge](#). *Principia: an international journal of epistemology*, 29(3), 6.

Further reading:

- Morgner, C. (2022). [The Making of Meaning: From the Individual to Social Order: Selections from Niklas Luhmann's Works on Semantics and Social Structure](#). Oxford University Press.
- Takahashi, T. (2024). [Observing News and Media in a Complex Society: A Sociocybernetic Perspective](#). Brill.
- Watson, S., & Brezovec, E. (2025). [Autopoietic Ecology: Rethinking Systems, Meaning, and Matter](#). Manuscript, DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.18462.24649.

Best paper award

The *Next Society Corporation* is pleased to sponsor an award of EUR 500 for the best paper submitted to the Luhmann Conference 2026.

Important dates

Submission deadline for abstracts is 15 May 2026.

Letters of Acceptance will be distributed by email on 30 May 2026.

Full paper submission deadline: 15 August 2026.

The conference programme will be sent to registered participants on 25 August 2026.

Programme Committee:

- Nico Buitendag, University of the Free State, South Africa
- Lars Clausen, UCL University College, Odense, Denmark
- Michał Kaczmarczyk, University of Gdańsk, Poland
- Vincent Lien, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom*
- Steffen Roth, Excelia Business School, La Rochelle, France, and University of Cambridge, United Kingdom
- Augusto Sales, Brazilian School of Public and Business Administration (FGV-EBAPE), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and Yale University, New Haven, United States of America
- Tilia Stingl de Vasconcelos Guedes, University of Applied Sciences for Management & Communication, Vienna, Austria
- Krešimir Žažar, University of Zagreb, Croatia*

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Publication opportunities

The organising committee is currently negotiating dedicated publication opportunities for the Luhmann Conference 2026. A considerable number of Luhmann Conference Community members are supporting *Kybernetes*, an important forum for research in cybernetics and systems thinking. Previous Luhmann Conferences have been or are currently being published in edited volumes or special issues of journals such as

- Roth S., Stingl T., and Zazar K. (in progress). *Coding society. Programmatic encounters between information systems and social theory*, *Information Technology & People*.
- Roth S. and Valentinov V. (in progress). *Reprogramming. Observed with social systems theory*, *Journal of Organizational Change Management*.
- Roth S. and Sales A. (in progress). *Programmes in management and organisation. Observed with social systems theory*, *Management Decision*.
- Roth S., Watson S., Dahms H., and Atanesyan A. (2025). *Guiding distinctions of social theory*, *Current Sociology*.
- Steffen Roth, Lars Clausen, Margit Neisig, and Augusto Sales (2025): *Guiding Distinctions of Management and Organisation Research*, *Management Revue*.
- Roth S. (2025), *Environments and Guiding Distinctions. Observed with social systems theory*, *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*.
- Roth S., Zazar K., Clausen L., and Stingl de Vasconcelos Guedes T. (2024, *Scientific Communication. Observed with social systems theory*, *Systemic Practice and Action Research*.
- Roth S., Laursen K., and Harste G. (2021), *Moral communication. Observed with social systems theory*, *Kybernetes 51(5)*.

- Roth S., Heidingsfelder M., Clausen L., and Laursen K. (2021), [George Spencer Brown's "Design with the NOR". With related essays](#), Bingley: Emerald.
- Febbrajo A. and Harste G. (2013). *Law and Intersystemic Communication. Understanding "Structural Coupling"*. London: Ashgate 2013

Historical background

In the 1980s, Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht and Ludwig Pfeiffer co-organised a number of conferences at the [Inter-University Centre of Post-Graduate Studies \(IUC\)](#) in Dubrovnik in the former Yugoslavia, now Croatia. Starting in 1981, Luhmann attended several of these conferences. Conference proceedings were published in a series of five rather big volumes at the important Suhrkamp Verlag (Der Diskurs der Literatur- und Sprachhistorie, 1983; Epochenschwellen und Epochenstrukturen im Diskurs der Literatur- und Sprachhistorie, 1985; Stil, 1986; Materialität der Kommunikation, 1988; Paradoxien, Dissonanzen, Zusammenbrüche, 1991). Many of these works were dedicated to semantic history and to a system theory of art.

The IUC was shelled during the siege of Dubrovnik in 1991, and for some years the conferences could not take place. Today, the IUC has been completely restored both physically and in spirit.

The series resumed subsequent to the complete restoration of the IUC premises and, in turning increasingly international, became known under the sub-headlines "Observed with Niklas Luhmann's systems theory" or "Observed with social systems theory", respectively.

Practical information

The conference fee is EUR 200 for early career scholars (PhD students and post-Docs two years from their first PhD) and EUR 250 for everybody else. The amount is due in advance by bank transfer once your submission is accepted and registration confirmed. Once transferred, the fee is not refundable.

The IUC is located in the vicinity of the famous medieval city of Dubrovnik. Accommodation is available in one of the many Dubrovnik hotels (Hotel Imperial is the closest to the IUC, but rather expensive. Hotel Lero is more affordable and located about 1.5 kilometres (1 mile) from the IUC. Another popular form is one of the many private accommodations (Room or "Sobe") which are relatively cheap and can be found everywhere. Do make sure to book well in advance to get the best price. The [IUC](#) also provides affordable but limited accommodation in the building itself.

The conference fee includes catering during coffee breaks. All other meals are taken at restaurants and cafés in town.

The Dubrovnik airport is situated about 20 kilometres south of Dubrovnik and connected to the town by regular shuttle busses. Travel by car and ferryboat is somewhat more complicated, though beautiful.

The weather in September is normally sunny and 25-30° C, though rain is not impossible. Whereas the weather is perfect for beach activities, buildings do still heat up considerably at this time of the year. The air conditioning systems in the conference rooms are therefore set at temperatures around 21° C, which implies that they are in continuous operation. Persons who get cold easily are therefore advised to bring a jacket and a light scarf.

Luhmann community groups and supporters @socialmedia

- Anglophone Facebook Group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/2834060864/>
- Germanophone Facebook Group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/132998763464111>
- Scandinavian Facebook Group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/147050955334098/>
- Next Society Institute: <https://twitter.com/nexsocinstitute>
- Inter-University Centre Dubrovnik: <https://twitter.com/IUCDubrovnik>
- Luhmann Conference: https://twitter.com/Luh_Con