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**TÍTULO:** Niklas Luhmann, la teoría de los sistemas sociales y la visión del Dr. Raf Vanderstraeten en la Sociología de la Educación Contemporánea.

**AUTORA:**

1. Dra. Belkis Rojas Hernández.

**RESUMEN:** Las universidades latinoamericanas han desempeñado un papel importante en la introducción del pensamiento luhmaniano en América Latina y con el objetivo de contribuir a este esfuerzo, sobre todo dirigido hacia el Caribe y fundamentalmente a Cuba, se realiza una entrevista inédita a Raf Vanderstraeten, Director del Centro de Teoría Social de la Universidad de Gante (Bélgica) y renombrado sociólogo de la educación, donde se ofrecen sus puntos de vista acerca de la Sociología actual, la Sociología de la Educación, el proceso de formación de los sociólogos y la importancia de la Teoría de los Sistemas Sociales de Niklas Luhmann.

**PALABRAS CLAVES:** Teoría de los Sistemas, la Sociología actual, la formación de los sociólogos, la teoría sociológica, la Sociología de la Educación.

**TITLE:** Niklas Luhmann, the theory of social systems and the vision of Dr. Raf Vanderstraeten in contemporary Sociology of Education.

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**ABSTRACT:** Latin American universities have played an important role in the introduction of Luhmannian thought in Latin America, and in order to contribute to this endeavor, and above all directed towards the Caribbean and fundamentally to Cuba, in an unpublished interview Raf Vanderstraeten, Director of the Center for Social Theory at the University of Gent (Belgium) and a renowned educational sociologist, offers his point of views about the current Sociology, Sociology of Education, the process of formation of sociologists and the importance of social systems theory of Niklas Luhmann.

**KEY WORDS:** Systems Theory, Current Sociology, training of sociologists, sociological theory and sociology of education.

**INTRODUCTION.**

Sociology is a discipline that cannot be oblivious to the social problems of its time, due to its origins as a social science since the late nineteenth century.

Today's society unlike the time when sociology was born, has made its hallmark permanent change, the social order is subject to continual disorder mainly due to the economic assimilation of the constant changes in technology.

Everything is fragile, everything is temporary, and everything is changeable. The social link is being replaced by virtual communication networks, which is called "social networks", which are as strong as it is the will to connect to the Internet by each individual.

Sociology has begun to respond to these and other problems, but not without theoretical and empirical difficulties. Rethinking the global society is not proving easy points of views of many

researchers, sociology has stalled in a theoretical crisis, becoming a fragmented discipline by several theoretical assumptions, paradigms and theories.

The theory of autopoietic social systems developed by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann provides an interesting contribution that can contribute to a critical reflection on today's society and education as one of its subsystems. Prof. Dr. Raf Vanderstraeten, Director of the Center for Social Theory at the University of Gent (Belgium), is considered one of the successors of the perspective developed by Luhmann. In this interview professor Vanderstraeten offers his criteria.

### **DEVELOPMENT.**

This interview was done by Belkis Rojas Hernández<sup>1</sup>, Doctor in Sociological Sciences and Full Professor at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Pinar del Río University.

### **Brief Curriculum report.**

**Raf Vanderstraeten** is currently University Professor and Director of the Center for Social Theory at Gent University. He has worked at universities in Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, and the Netherlands. Next to social theory, he is interested in sociology of education, sociology of religion and sociology of science. His work has appeared in several books and a broad range of academic journals, including *Acta Sociológica*, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, *British Journal of Sociology*, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, *Educational Review*, *Educational Theory*, *Minerva*, *Sociology*, *Science in Context*, *Soziale Systeme*, *Soziale Welt*, *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik*, and *Zeitschrift für Soziologie*.

### **Interview presentation.**

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<sup>1</sup> Entrevista realizada por la Doctora en Ciencias Sociológicas Belkis Rojas Hernández, Profesora Titular de la Facultad de Ciencias Sociales y Humanísticas de la Universidad de Pinar del Río. La entrevista fue efectuada durante la estancia posdoctoral en el Departamento de Sociología de la Universidad de Gante, Bélgica en el marco del Programa Erasmus Mundo Lindo, en el periodo comprendido de octubre del 2015 a abril del 2016. Agradecemos la colaboración del Dr. Raf Vanderstraeten por la atención brindada y las respuestas a esta entrevista.

***Topic 1: Theory of the current systems and Sociology.***

*Interviewer:*

1. How was born, grew and consolidated in the vocation your study about the theory of social systems?

*Prof. Dr. Raf Vanderstraeten:*

I became aware of the work of Niklas Luhmann when I was writing my PhD dissertation and was looking for theories that could adequately deal with the complexity of society. I did read many of his publications on my own at that time. Nobody ever taught me about Luhmann's theory – except Niklas Luhmann himself, with whom I was able to study for half a year at the University of Bielefeld in Germany in the early 1990s. I have used Luhmann's theory as a source of inspiration ever since.

In the early 2000s, I was able to occupy Luhmann's professorial chair and teach sociological theory at the University of Bielefeld. As a result, I became closely identified with Luhmann's theory of social systems.

*Interviewer:*

2. Of the many anecdotes and experiences accumulated over time has developed this complex subject line experiences, could you tell one that has left an indelible mark on the intellect and spirit?

*Prof. Dr. Raf Vanderstraeten:*

What is for me very important is the ability of the theory to deal with the complexity of the social world – without reducing this complexity to existing theoretical categories. Reading work by Niklas Luhmann or one of his scholars, this experience often returns: their approach often

offers a good, refreshing grasp of the complexity of the social world. That is very rewarding in itself – and very stimulating for my own research.

*Interviewer:*

3. From your perspective, what are the most important concepts of the theory of social systems? why is it important in today's sociology?

*Prof. Dr. Raf Vanderstraeten:*

There are many important concepts and distinctions in this theory. Perhaps the most important ones are related to the idea of the functional differentiation of society. Functional differentiation means that society is divided into different systems or fields, which have their own autonomy. Examples of such systems include: education, science, politics, religion, law, the economy, etc. These systems operate “autopoietically” – as Luhmann liked to say (following the Chilean biologist Humberto Maturana). Autopoiesis means self (auto) and production (poiesis). They produce and create their own distinctions, they develop their own modus operandi, and they define their own criteria of inclusion and exclusion. If one uses these concepts, one is already able to provide a complex picture of modern society.

*Interviewer:*

4. Prof. Vanderstraeten, you have developed important work on the theory of social systems: neo-institutionalism and network theory and have developed several studies about the history and theory of education. In your opinion, the theory of social systems has the ability to produce successful intervention strategies, is it a description of society or can it be frame in a theory of description and intervention?

*Prof. Dr. Raf Vanderstraeten:*

It is interesting to see that many of the concepts we use to describe the world also call for action; many of our descriptions also carry prescriptions. The way we understand the nature of the child also informs us about what education should look like, what failed education is, what success or the lack thereof implies. Many of the concepts we use to speak about education thus have a normative component. I think it is important to be aware of the fact that our dominant culture expects us to intervene in the world, the change of the world for the better – and not just to describe it as it is.

*Interviewer:*

5. In which perspective can the theory of social systems can be associated and improved?

*Prof. Dr. Raf Vanderstraeten:*

I believe that we need to develop a conversation between empirical research about different subjects and the theoretical concepts we use in sociology. The world changes all the time – and it requires that we adapt our theoretical instruments. I am interested in some of the basic distinctions that organize our social world – and I hope that I am able to develop some theoretical concepts that allow to grasp the complexity of our world.

*Interviewer:*

6. The Western European context always served as background to the analysis of Luhmann, as well as his research on functional differentiation also took the German and European contexts as its starting point. Do you think this is a difficulty in the use of the systems theory in Latin American and the Caribbean islands is actually considered?

*Prof. Dr. Raf Vanderstraeten:*

That is true. But an important inspiration for Luhmann came from the work of the Chilean biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela. Much of Luhmann's work has also been translated into Spanish by people from Latin-America, notably by Javier Torres Nafarrate from Mexico and Dario Rodriguez from Chile. This is an indication of the affinity between Luhmann's theory and Latin American or Caribbean experiences. I hope that collaboration with researchers from Latin American or the Caribbean Islands will further strengthen this affinity.

***Topic 2. The formation of sociologists and the sociological theory.***

*Interviewer:*

1. Do you think that the sociological theory is in crisis today?

*Prof. Dr. Raf Vanderstraeten:*

There are many different sociological theories at the moment. The lack of a unitary framework might be perceived as an indication of a crisis situation. Other disciplines often exhibit more unity when it comes to theoretical frameworks. As a consequence, sociologists often rely on empirical data and statistical methods to give 'prove' of their scientific merits. However, the development of a theoretical body of knowledge belongs to the core of scientific endeavors. I believe that more work needs to be invested in the development of theoretical frameworks in order to make more progress.

*Interviewer:*

2. Prof. Vanderstraeten, you are experienced in teaching sociology at the University of Gent, taking into account the experience, I will formulate the following question. How important is the sociological theory within sociology as a science and in the process of formation of sociologists at all levels from degree to doctorate?

*Prof. Dr. Raf Vanderstraeten:*

I do not think that sociology distinguishes itself because its practitioners make use of surveys or particular sets of data – such things can be used in other disciplines, too. By contrast, what is characteristic of sociology is a particular perspective, a particular way of asking questions, of critically reflecting upon the social world. Without sociological theory (or theories), this is not possible. I therefore think that sociological theory is crucial to sociology and to the training of sociologists.

*Interviewer:*

3. In a complex society like contemporary one, where each day the multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary studies get stronger, do you think it is still possible and necessary the formation of sociologists?

*Prof. Dr. Raf Vanderstraeten:*

Multidisciplinarity depends – as the word itself indicates – on the existence of multiple disciplines. I also think that multi- or inter-disciplinarity is of crucial relevance, but the contemporary university is structured around disciplines. Departments mostly stand for disciplines (sociology, psychology, philosophy, mathematics, physics, etc.), but within a discipline such as sociology, it is always important to pay attention to transdisciplinary developments or developments in other disciplines. To advance sociological knowledge, to develop new perspectives and frameworks, we need to pay careful attention to what takes place in other fields of study.



*Interviewer:*

4. What do you think about the dichotomy of the wider process of formation of sociologists at universities and the problems of their inclusion in the labor market? How to overcome the dichotomy?

*Prof. Dr. Raf Vanderstraeten:*

Sociology is defined as a scientific discipline, not as a particular profession or job category. This distinguishes sociology, for example, from medicine or law. In these fields of study, there is a clear link between training and profession. But such clear link also makes people unfit for other professions. What can people who study medicine do apart from practicing medicine? Sociology does not have a clear link with a specific kind of job – but it might open up to different jobs, it might prepare for the complexity and flexibility of the social world because of the fact that it does not have strong connections with a particular profession.

Sociology (and some other disciplines, such as mathematics, for example) might prepare people for a broad range of jobs; it might offer them a variety of professional opportunities and chances – adapted to individual preferences and market demands.

*Interviewer:*

5. Do you consider important and decisive in the actual teaching of sociological theory and methodology of sociological research the use of educational technologies?

*Prof. Dr. Raf Vanderstraeten:*

Expectations regarding the use of educational technology have changed rapidly during the last decades. Most students are experts in the new media. I try not to disappoint them – and make use of several technologies myself. It is a way in which we, as university teachers, need to adapt to the changing social world.

***Topic 3. Sociology of Education.***

*Interviewer:*

1. What issues should study the sociology of education today?

*Prof. Dr. Raf Vanderstraeten:*

There is a lot of sociological research that deals with education today. In fact, there is so much that it is virtually impossible to have an overview of everything that is currently published.

We have looked a lot at the reproduction of particular distinctions via education. Much attention has been focused on the reproduction and legitimation of distinctions related to gender, social class, race, etc. Given the rapid expansion of the educational system, not only at the level of primary and secondary education, but now also at the level of higher education, I think that it would be worthwhile to the ways in which participation in education changes (and not just reproduces) society.

Education is not something 'passive', but participation in education also changes the way people behave, think, collaborate with others, etc. Perhaps it is time to devote more attention to the way in which widespread schooling is changing our society.

*Interviewer:*

2. Since a personal point of view, in current research in Sociology of Education, there are empirical studies that assume both a quantitative or qualitative perspective, and in a lesser extent theoretical analyzes and theoretical discussions. Does the theory of social systems can help improve this situation?

*Prof. Dr. Raf Vanderstraeten:*

I am in favour of a close link between theory and methodology. Theory needs to be embedded within empirical research, while empirical research needs to address questions that are grounded

within particular theoretical frameworks. Systems theory certainly is one way to improve the link between theory and methodology – but people working outside of this particular framework should also attempt to integrate theoretical and methodological concerns.

*Interviewer:*

3. A significant part of the academic production of the Sociology of Education is dedicated, especially in Latin America, to studies on school-family relationship from the Critical Sociology fundamentally. Are these studies valid on school relationship from family systems theory? Why?

*Prof. Dr. Raf Vanderstraeten:*

It is remarkable that education takes place in different social settings, such as the family or household and the school. The lack of coordination between these social settings is also remarkable: there is not much contact between teachers and parents; children also are different persons in the family and in school.

While it might be said that the lack of coordination learns children to prepare for a complex social world, in which they have to fulfil different roles and operate in different settings, it might also be said that more coordination might facilitate the education process. Nowadays the school has to deal with problems which emerge in the family, and the other way around: families have to deal with problems which emerge for their children in the school. We might live in a better world, when families and schools would not or less burden each other with such problems...

*Interviewer:*

Prof. Vanderstraeten, thank you very much for your time and willingness (end of interview).

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