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**Observing International Relations**

Niklas Luhmann and world politics

*Edited by Mathias Albert and Lena Hilkermeier*



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# Preface

All books have a (sometimes quite long) history before they are published. As far as can be remembered, the work leading to this present volume originated at some point during a snowstorm in Iceland in early 1998, with one of this volume's editors and one of its authors driving through it and arguing about the usefulness of trying to bring Luhmannian theory to IR audiences (and even more intensively about the wisdom of driving fast on icy roads while seeing nothing). The argument was then continued in a more systematic fashion in other contexts, gradually bringing in the authors of this volume at some point. In addition to a number of panels at annual meetings of the International Studies Association and the British International Studies Association, most original papers were presented either at a workshop in Darmstadt in November 1999 (funded by the World Society Foundation in Zürich), or at an ECPR workshop in Copenhagen in April 2000 (co-organized by Mathias Albert and Chris Brown). With originally no publication project attached to these events, an increasing interest voiced on the subject at various occasions during 2001 led to the constitution of the editorial team and to re-approaching this volume's authors to either revise their work or, in some cases, provide new contributions.

The realization of this volume would not have been possible without the support of *The New International Relations* series editors, Barry Buzan and Richard Little. Thanks also go to Heidi Bagtazo and Grace McInnes for their guidance and efforts on the publisher's side. Special thanks to Chris Brown, not only for co-organizing the Copenhagen meeting, but particularly for reliably appearing at most Albert-organized conferences and workshops and enriching them in more than an academic way. The final preparation of the manuscript would not have been possible without the intensive work by Jochen Walter at the University of Bielefeld. Very special thanks to him.

The Editors  
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## Series editor's preface

The study of international relations, despite or perhaps even because of its subject matter, has often been accused of being an essentially American and frequently rather parochial discipline. It is seen, for example, to be unreceptive to non-English speaking social theorists. Such generalizations have, of course, always been open to challenge or, at any rate, qualification. It can be argued, after all, that not many social theorists have demonstrated very much interest in international relations. But, in any event, with the growing interest in and awareness of the forces of globalization, generalizations of this kind are beginning to look increasingly anachronistic. As a consequence, international relations theorists can now simply not afford to look the other way and ignore the work of social theorists. And, by the same token, social theorists need to take account of the theoretical work being carried out in the field of International Relations.

This book represents an important step in this direction, being one of the very first attempts to explore the implications of the German social theorist, Niklas Luhmann, for the study of international relations. Although he is one of the most important contemporary social theorists, his work is scarcely known by students of International Relations in the Anglophone world. Yet his work represents a fundamental challenge to traditional thinking in International Relations because although he adopts a global perspective, his theoretical stance makes it clear that it is a categorical error to privilege relations between states when adopting this perspective. Describing the discipline in terms of international relations becomes a misnomer as far as Luhmann is concerned. At the same time, however, his stance also questions the approach of traditional sociologists who are interested in comparing one society with another. Luhmann's starting point is that there is only one society and that is world society.

Luhmann's approach, therefore, inserts yet another nail in the coffin of those thinkers who continue to cling to a Westphalian view of international relations. Indeed, for Luhmann, the Westphalian model has never provided useful tools for thinking about the world. Focusing, in the first instance, on the relations between autonomous states, is considered to inhibit theoretical thinking about the world.

Of course, post-Westphalian thinking has now almost become conventional wisdom in some branches of the study of international relations. But these attempts to grapple with a post-Westphalian world are unlikely to convince

Luhmann, who has come to the conclusion that one of the best ways to make sense of social reality is to take advantage of Modern Systems Theory. Understanding the implications of this methodological turn for anyone who is not versed in Modern Systems Theory, however, is not at all straightforward. It represents a very distinctive approach to theorizing and one that is radically different to conventional thinking, not only in the field of International Relations, but also in most areas of the social sciences.

One of the many merits of this book is that it provides a very clear and well-rounded exposition of Luhmann's complex social theory. Moreover, because the authors all approach the theory from rather different perspectives and not all are persuaded of either the merits of the theory or its relevance for the study of international relations, the book provides the reader with some critical distance that makes it easier to arrive at an independent judgement as to the strengths and weaknesses of the theory. A second important feature of the book is that it places modern systems theory in a very broad context, showing how it relates to other relevant areas of literature and, in particular, to the literature on world society that can be found in both the study of international relations and the social sciences more generally. A third strength of the book is that it provides a set of case studies that help to illustrate how the theory works and to consolidate an understanding of Luhmann's ideas. Finally, it is worth noting that the book highlights the strengths of both Luhmann's approach to the social world and the expanding literature in the field of International Relations, and it is acknowledged that these two areas can enrich each other. Open-minded approaches that seek to build bridges and promote dialogue are to be welcomed and applauded.

Richard Little  
University of Bristol

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# 1 Introduction

*Mathias Albert*

## **Why Modern Systems Theory and International Relations?**

The field of International Relations already seems to be characterized by a bewildering variety of theories, both in terms of specific disciplinary approaches as well as in terms of theoretical imports from neighboring disciplines. So why, with the sociological body of theory conceived by and following Niklas Luhmann, bring another theory to the purview of IR? The chapters in this volume are an attempt to provide possible answers to this question, particularly also giving room to answers which in the end conclude that Modern Systems Theory (MST) and International Relations make uneasy bedfellows. The preliminary answer given in these introductory remarks is of a more superficial kind and pertains to the legitimacy of starting with the entire exercise in the first place. Arguably, the study of international relations has always benefited from taking insights from theories of society into account: be it in the more direct connections between realist understandings of international relations on the one and sociological thought on the other hand as in the work of Raymond Aron, for example; be it in the impact which Parsonian theory had on the work of Karl Deutsch and others; or be it, of more recent origin, in the form in which Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration has been put to use by Alexander Wendt in order to conceptualize the international system, or in the way in which Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action has been employed to understand the generation and impact of norms by Thomas Risse and others. Given that notions of an "international society" or indeed a "world society" feature increasingly prominently in attempts to provide comprehensive conceptual frameworks to understand the contours and the dynamics of what can no longer satisfactorily be described as a ("Westphalian") "international system," IR thus seems well prepared to thoroughly think through these notions of a society beyond the state, utilizing its well-established links to sociological theory. Against this background, it comes all the more as a surprise that up to now Luhmann's work has received scant attention by IR scholars only. Although probably one of the most fervently *supported* and most polemically *opposed* contemporary theories of society, not even its most enthusiastic opponents deny that it is one of the (if

not *the*) most fully developed and sophisticated macro-theories of society around. And, at least at first glance, for IR scholars struggling with how to conceptualize a “post-Westphalian” world, this theory<sup>1</sup> might seem to be particularly attractive since it does conceive itself as a theory of *world society*. World society is not seen as a contemporarily emerging phenomenon by Luhmann, but rather as something whose existence cannot plausibly be denied if society is seen as being constituted by communication and if today all communication can, at least in principle, connect to all communication (i.e. there is no undiscovered “blind spot” of communication left on the planet).

This is not the place to elaborate extensively on why it is that IR theory has not paid much attention to the work of Niklas Luhmann, but two reasons seem to stand out: first of all, and rather straightforward, the theory of Niklas Luhmann, which for more than thirty years has formed the counterpart to the work of Jürgen Habermas in German social theory and public intellectual discourse (see Habermas and Luhmann 1973), and which is read and discussed widely particularly in Scandinavian countries, Italy, Spain, and Japan, has not been received widely in Anglophone – nor, for that matter, Francophone – countries. Relatively few of Luhmann’s books have been translated into English, and those translated have been discussed more in cultural studies than in the social sciences.<sup>2</sup> While this only sparse reception of Luhmann’s work in Anglo-American sociology arguably already impedes upon its further reception in the discipline of International Relations, the fact that this reception has also not taken place in IR debates in countries where Luhmann’s work plays a prominent role in sociological discourse points to a second reason, which is of a more systematic kind in that it pertains to the contents of Luhmann’s theory. This theory is, to put it bluntly, an extremely complex kind of theory; as a theory of society, it consists of three different sets of theories connected to each other: a theory of social systems, a theory of social differentiation, and a theory of social evolution.<sup>3</sup> In all of these theories, it arguably presents a major deviation from the previously existing state of theorizing; and it comes along with the rather far-reaching claim to actually present a comprehensive theory of society (a claim which is however ironically counteracted by Luhmann’s radical constructivism). To critics, this results in a body of literature plainly incomprehensible at best; to proponents, it opens up an extremely rich reservoir of ideas, concepts, and methods to think about society in a novel and stimulating way.

Against this background, the present volume sets itself a difficult task. It seeks to inspect the possible uses of Luhmannian theory for studies in the discipline of IR. It does so for what is deemed to be a deserving purpose, namely to partake in the search for conceptual vocabularies and tools which help to grasp and more aptly describe a global societal context which can no longer be reduced to an international system (and in which such an international system may possibly also not form a clearly delineated fabric of social reality either). Yet this task is complicated by the fact that Luhmann’s theory is extremely complex in itself and little known in the IR community.

To measure up to such a task, an obvious strategy would be to first introduce Luhmann's theory and then "apply" it to IR. The present volume does, however, not adopt such a strategy, for basically one reason: it is clearly beyond its scope; the most we can hope to achieve is to introduce some ideas and concepts which are central to this complex body of theory and which are important for relating it to IR (and, of course, to instill some interest to read on beyond that). This is of course to clearly take sides in the ongoing dispute on whether or not it is possible to use Luhmann's rich body of theory as a "toolbox" or whether it forms somewhat of a self-enclosed system in itself which can and must only be treated as such. And it is to argue that just as there is no monolithic bloc of "IR theory" on the one side, so there is no static Luhmannian theory of society on the other. Against this background, it is the strategy of this volume not to introduce a theory and apply it to something, but to *stage a number of encounters* between elements of Luhmann's theory of society and parts of contemporary IR theorizing. These encounters can be summarized along three lines which also provide the ordering principle for the following chapters. Part I deals with the general issue of whether and how it actually makes sense to try and somehow conjoin Luhmannian and IR theorizing. Part II then leaves Luhmannian theorizing to a certain extent in that it takes a focus on different contemporary notions and concepts of "world society." The purpose of this part is not only to further elucidate some aspects of Luhmann's notion of "world society" in contrast to other such notions, but also to identify points where these diverging notions of world society show points of overlap which could be developed further. Part III then seeks to demonstrate and assess the perspective which Modern Systems Theory offers on central concepts of IR, such as power, sovereignty, governance, and war.

## Overview of the chapters

Part I sets the tone for the entire volume in that it comprises contributions which diverge in their assessment of the usefulness of bringing IR and MST closer to each other, yet also demonstrate the quite varied ways in which it is possible to read – and thereby introduce – Luhmann's theory.

As much as Mathias Albert argues for the fruitfulness of an encounter between Modern Systems Theory (MST) and IR, yet also points out some limits of such an encounter, Thomas Diez stresses the limits of MST for IR yet seeks to preserve some beneficial insights. Albert argues that the relation between MST and IR should be conceived of as a two-way street. For him, MST offers a conceptual framework which takes the "society" in "world society" seriously, i.e. as something which sees world society as a subject to be properly treated by a theory of society and its component parts. Such an orientation quite resolutely places thought about a global beyond any kind of "methodological nationalism" and it forces IR to rephrase its subject matter in that it can henceforth only be delineated in terms of internal differentiations of world society; yet it also requires one to critically inspect some notions central to IR – such as politics and

power – in the light of an MST reading of these concepts. By so doing, argues Albert, some shortcomings of MST also come into sight for which contributions from IR might provide some correctives. Among other things, this first and foremost pertains to MST's notion that the political system of world society remains primarily differentiated into states; this premise ignores much of the work done in IR on emerging forms of institutionalization and governance beyond the state which could in fact point to a change in the primary form of differentiation of one of world society's function systems. While Thomas Diez also sees some potential benefits to be gained from MST, his main argument is that critical theorizing in IR, particularly if inspired by poststructuralist works, offers much the same yet does not shed the political and emancipatory impetus in the same way as does Luhmann. The similarities between poststructuralist and particularly Foucauldian thought on the one hand and Luhmann's work on the other are numerous: in both cases, for example, a radically constructivist stance is adopted; in both cases, the existence and in fact possibility of a universally shared normative ground is denied. Yet, in Diez's view Luhmannian thought throws out the baby with the bathwater: it not only "de-centers" the subject, but seeks to do away with it and any concept of agency based thereupon entirely. This makes MST potentially useful for producing some theoretical insights, but not for a critical discourse in IR ultimately oriented towards some form of political practice. While Stefan Roszbach also shares the skepticism regarding the usefulness of MST and particularly Luhmann's notion of "world society," he offers a reading very different from the chapters by Albert and Diez. Although skeptical, Roszbach provides a reading much more deeply immersed in Luhmann's writings. Quite surprisingly, Roszbach seems to criticize what both Albert and Diez seem to agree on as forming a virtue in Luhmann's thought, namely his anti-ontological and radically constructivist stance. He argues that – traceable in Luhmann's writings – the notion of totality inherent in world society refers to a mysticism in Luhmann, bearing resemblance to Gnostic thought. Roszbach's chapter makes interesting reading in that he does not overtly *reject* Luhmann; but he points to a certain tradition in which his thought is situated which is not usually acknowledged, yet which "appeals to his readers today to the extent that they share this loss of orientation."

Besides the arguments they provide as such, the three chapters of the first part of this volume are exemplary for the different ways in which it is possible to approach MST, ranging from some sort of largely sympathetic yet critical encounter (Albert), to a critical encounter retaining some sympathy (Diez), to an exegesis which seems as full of criticism as admiration (Roszbach); similar varying forms of engagement with MST can be found in all the chapters which follow.

The contributions in Part II are arguably most remote from staging direct encounters with MST. They seek to elucidate MST's notion of "world society" not through a development of MST vocabulary as such, but by contrasting it with other notions of world society. This part can thus also be read as an attempt to provide an overview over different concepts of "world society" within contemporary IR and sociological theory.

Chris Brown asks whether international society theory in the English School tradition, which has gained prominence again in recent debates, is compatible with competing notions of world society. While international society theory is seen to share more basic assumptions with classical realism than is often acknowledged, it is distinctly set apart from the latter by allowing for a flourishing of different conceptions of the Good. In that respect, Burton's notion of the state as a concentration of power within his account of world society also puts it closer to classical realism than to international society theory. In contrast, Brown finds many more shared aspects and points of contact between the English School and the sociological institutionalism of the Stanford School which, as he argues, both share a basic underlying "structurationist" tendency in their conceptualization of the relation between states on the one hand and international/world society on the other, and which both put a great deal of emphasis on international institutions. Against this array of possible commonalities between different accounts of world society (or the international system in the realist case) and the English School account of an international society, Brown observes a deep and fundamental, possibly unbridgeable, gap between this account and Luhmann's notion of world society. The basic rift is not only located in the very different notions of "system" employed, but also, and possibly more important, relates to the fact that while international society is something constituted by norms, world society is seen as not being integrated normatively at all by MST.

Working from within the tradition of the Stanford school-type sociological institutionalism, George Thomas finds more possible points of contact with a Modern Systems account of world society. Both approaches focus on change in world society as some form of endogenous change *within* society, yet differ in that they attribute this change to either differentiation (in the systems theoretical case) or to a rationalizing process (in the institutionalist case). This rationalizing process can be demonstrated by the way in which world cultural models shape organizational forms and have effects on both state and non-state actors alike. The rising number of International Non-Governmental Organizations is a case in point; the formal similarities between different religious movements all over the world (despite marked differences in the world views advocated) is another. After outlining the institutionalist research agenda, Thomas takes up its relation to MST. While in no way downplaying the rather fundamental difference which lies in the ascription of change to either differentiation or rationalization, he argues that both approaches are still in the same quadrant of viewing the world in that neither is actor-centered and both ground their analyses in processes rather than in (actors') interests. Yet institutionalist analysis tends to at least include actors as being constituted out of the rationalization of activity, and thus reserves an important place for them where MST does not. However, and here echoing similar observations in the sociological debate, there is still a lot of room left to explore between MST and sociological institutionalism.

Lothar Brock provides a marked contrast to both MST and sociological institutionalism in that he argues for a view of world society to be understood as

something constituted “from the bottom up.” Although the evolution of an international and a world society “from the bottom up” are also to be understood in a rather direct sense in that they are fed by an increase and a “thickening” of inter- and transnational relations, the point in Brock’s argument is that international system, international society and world society designate three different standards of appropriateness of political behavior. Thus understood, all three have been around for quite a while and the most important question in order to trace change would then be the shifting importance between these standards of appropriateness of political behavior. With reference to long-term historical change Brock argues that world society formation “from the bottom up” manifests itself in that the logic of multiple representation (characteristic of world society) increasingly “is beginning to permeate those institutions which represent the logic of autonomy.” Such a view does not see world society as an entirely normatively integrated world-wide form of “classical” society, yet does acknowledge the necessity of at least some form of symbolic integration of such a world society which “involves the internalization of universal norms as identical points of reference in widely differing contexts.” In this sense, Brock brings an element of community formation to world society formation and is thus arguably rather distant from both Stanford School or MST notions of world society, and much closer to classical theories of society. The relation between these classical theories of society as far as embedded in classical theories of modernity and the notion of world society is inspected in Dietrich Jung’s chapter. In Jung’s reading, Luhmann’s theory of society stands in the tradition of classical theories of modernization and society, yet replaces the central distinction between tradition and modernity by one between system and environment. Yet already in the classical texts by, among others, Weber, Simmel and Bloch, an emergent world society is seen to be diagnosed in which, however, patterns of modern and traditional society are arranged in a patchwork-like fashion and create the impression of heterogeneity; nonetheless, regarding society as a whole, unlike MST the classical texts do still entail a view of the world in moral and normative terms. In that it shifts its focus from social to functional integration, MST works without such a view. However, the construction of an at least rough line of discursive and theoretical continuity between classical theories of modernization and Luhmann’s theory of society allows Jung to stay away from the diagnosis of significant, and sometimes even radical and unbridgeable disjunctures between MST’s notion of world society and the other notions of international/world society inspected by the other chapters in this part. Quite to the contrary, Jung is able to relate the arguments of Brown, Brock, and Thomas to the identified continuum of theorizing about (world) society. Thus, for example, the view of world society in the world cultural approach represented by Thomas is seen as a continuation of Max Weber’s conceptualization of modernity as a process of rationalization. Because of this, Jung is able to diagnose an exchange between IR theory and sociological theories of society (in the plural) as a potentially fruitful exercise.

In addition to providing valuable insights into different contemporary conceptualizations of world society/international society, the contributions of Part II

also demonstrate the vastly different possibilities, ways, tones and styles to engage with Luhmann's theory. This vast array of different possibilities highlights both the richness of Luhmann's work as well as the difficulty of simply "employing" it. This double richness and difficulty is further highlighted in the third and most extensive part of this volume. Unlike in Part II, which somehow circled Luhmannian theory on the "margins" by relating to its notion of world society which in Luhmann's work is of great systematic importance yet barely developed explicitly itself, the authors of the chapters in Part III seek more direct recourse either to central concepts or aspects of Luhmann's theory.

Three chapters take up aspects of Luhmann's vast analyses on the interrelation between societal structure and semantics, yet they do so in markedly different ways. Anders Esmark takes a systems theoretical look at the transformation of sovereignty and argues that globalization does not present a threat to sovereignty, but rather that sovereignty facilitates globalization. Referring to Luhmann's observation of the function of paradoxification and deparadoxification for the continuing of communication, Esmark traces the evolution of the semantics of sovereignty in such a context. Thus understood, the strategies of paradoxification and deparadoxification that go along with the evolution of the semantics of sovereignty constitute a sphere of political communication *within which* both territorial segmentation and now globalization unfold. It is important for Esmark to stress that such an analysis diverges from poststructuralist critiques which basically "stop" with "uncovering" paradoxes, in that it also accounts for how and why communication and hence the reproduction of societal structure and semantics continue *despite* extensive paradoxality. If sovereignty is thus understood as one of the most important and persistent self-mystifications and paradoxifications in and for political communication which has an important function to fulfill for the continuance of political communication and thus for the self-referential reproduction of the (global) political system, then indeed any notion of a challenge posed to sovereignty by globalization seems to be misplaced. A more appropriate question then indeed might be which new programs or forms assume the function of paradoxification *for* political communication *from* sovereignty (whether keeping its name or not). While Esmark combines Luhmann's analysis of the relation between societal structure and semantics with his utilization of Spencer Brownian formal logic, Hans-Martin Jaeger uses it in a more narrow sense as an advanced form of historical sociology. He traces the changes of "world opinion" as a medium of communication and the shifts in societal structure enabled thereby. Against a historical analysis of the role of public opinion in international affairs in the nineteenth century, Jaeger finds that "world opinion" emerges as a medium of communication in and for international politics with the founding of the League of Nations "and in response to early-twentieth century problems of world-societal differentiation." What he suggests is that world opinion emerged as a *second* – next to power – symbolically generalized medium of communication for the political system, one able to assist the territorially differentiated political system in coping with the functional differentiation prevalent in the economic system, for example. Jaeger finds that "world opinion" was able to provide the



communicative frame for a realignment of political communication, opening semantic space for international cooperation and a peaceful future. Yet it is clear that in so doing world opinion retains the status of a symbolically generalized medium of communication *second* to power in the political system. It helps to align the political system's territorial differentiation with the functional differentiation in its environment, yet it does not (up to now) challenge the primacy of this territorial differentiation.

In a complex and almost in itself "Luhmann-style" contribution, Gorm Harste reconstructs the evolution of a self-referential *military* system. In an elaborate historical semantic analysis, he first traces how the war/peace differential develops as a "supercode" of communication in an evolutionary process from ancient Greece through the Crusades. While he argues that it is not possible to exactly determine when a military system emerges as an autopoietic system, he follows the systems theoretical insight in that this evolution requires an increasing autonomy from externally defined conditions. In Harste's eyes, such a development primarily occurs through the necessity and the evolution of the systematic provision and organization of supply for the military and the organization of systems of taxation and state control required for this purpose. However, these changes in societal structure are only possible against this background of a shift in semantics which involves a struggle between and over codes which can be interpreted as a movement between secularizations and resacralizations of war. It was only through successfully aligning the reason of state and the reason of God in the seventeenth century, however, that "semantics of state, war and military *necessity* were reconstructed at a level at which the material necessities could be described on a new resacralized level," providing the basis for military problems to be discussed *in their own terms*. Harste puts his historical sociological analysis in an even wider context of the evolution of world society when he proposes that while the Westphalian semantics imply that states are the "sovereign systems" of world society, it is rather the case that it was "the self-referential, self-organizing and autopoietic subsystems of military, finance, research, law, infrastructure, etc., *in between* the European organizational subsystems [i.e. states] that communicated more or less identical codes across the boundaries."

Leaving the analyses of the interrelation between societal structure and semantics, the chapter by Mathias Albert and Lena Hilkermeier seeks to elucidate the concept of "organization" in MST. It starts with the observation that within current debates on global change, the concept of organization remains undertheorized. Playing on a theme already ventilated in the chapter by Thomas, it seeks to stage an encounter between sociological neo-institutionalist and MST understandings of organizations and organization-environment relations, identifying particular strengths and weaknesses of both approaches. Rather than argue for the adoption of one or the other approach for a conceptually rich study of international organizations, the chapter seeks to provide an initial vocabulary which can be developed further. However, it argues that both approaches (and any combination of them) require one to quite drastically over-

haul existing views of and on international organizations in world society. Particularly if organizations are seen as social systems defined by the criteria of membership and their deciding upon decisional premises themselves (as organizations are seen by MST), it might very well be that the time is ripe for an intensive empirical study of which “international organizations” actually function as organizations (or social systems) in world society and can be analyzed as such.

In his chapter, Dieter Kerwer inspects the consequences of MST’s rather pronounced skepticism regarding the possibilities of successfully steering social systems. This skepticism is fueled by the general theoretical construction of the self-referentiality of social systems on the one hand. On the other hand, and particularly relevant in a global context, this skepticism also follows from the observation that the systems of law and politics remain norm-oriented and thus in a way conflict with other function systems in a “knowledge society” which are not oriented towards the normatively secured stability of expectations, but towards constant innovation and change. This leads to what Kerwer labels “an uncommon image of political decision-making” in MST, particularly if applied to the context of international politics. Against the background of the problems of successful steering perceived by MST and the impossibility for the political system to fulfill the function of providing collectively binding decisions beyond the nation state, it provides a perspective uncommon for students of IR, namely that “more co-operation might not contribute to better fulfilling the function of politics.” Yet, cautions Kerwer, it might very well be that MST downplays or ignores the forms of cooperation that have evolved empirically within the political system of world society.

In Part III’s final chapter, Stefano Guzzini takes a closer look at Luhmann’s concept of power which, in contrast to other constructivist social theorizing, he finds to be defined rather narrowly in that it remains limited to the political system. While Luhmann conceives power as a medium of communication in the Parsonian tradition (yet placed into a remodeled theoretical environment) and thus basically seems to underwrite a conceptualization where power could literally be everywhere, Guzzini argues that although such a broad view of power always remains hidden somewhere in Luhmann’s work, his “autopoietic turn” is consequential in that it requires Luhmann to restrict power as being the symbolic medium of communication typical for the political system. However, according to Guzzini, such a move is neither necessary nor carried out fully by Luhmann in his writings. He argues that although Luhmann “presents a unique and elaborate constructivist understanding of power,” his limitation of power as a symbolically generalized medium of communication to the political system in fact loses some valuable insights from the IR power literature and from other sociological approaches, such as Bourdieu’s.

The chapters of this volume represent not only different ways to engage with Luhmannian theory and to relate it to other theories of world society and concepts in International Relations, they also span from more or less unquestioning “adoptions” of a Luhmannian kind of thought to its critical reflection

and rejection. Their reading will probably stir a similar reaction as that encountered by Modern Systems Theory in general, ranging from engaging with it enthusiastically to denouncing it fervently. Yet the concluding remarks suggest that there is ample to be learned and gained in the space in between.

### **Notes**

- 1 Which, incidentally, is Westphalian in origin in that Luhmann spent most of his academic life (to which he came rather late) at the University of Bielefeld.
- 2 Of the major works, only *Social Systems* (Luhmann 1995a) is available in English; therefore, in the present volume, all translations of Luhmann from German are, if not otherwise noted, the authors' own.
- 3 This is sometimes obstructed by the fact that, as in the present volume, the notion of "systems theory" has established itself as shorthand for Luhmann's theory of society.

**Part I**

# **Luhmann and IR**

A worthwhile encounter?



## 2 On the Modern Systems Theory of society and IR

### Contacts and disjunctures between different kinds of theorizing

*Mathias Albert*

While still barely received in Anglo-American social science, the Modern Systems Theory of society (MST), as developed by Niklas Luhmann in particular, has emerged as one of the most widely discussed theories of society in a number of academic communities. However, the reception of Luhmann's theory has largely been avoided by the academic field of International Relations. Nonetheless, the time might be ripe for a change for two reasons. *On the one hand*, the notion of "society" plays an increasingly important role in the field of IR (taking the forms of, variably, "international society," "global civil society," or "world society"). While attentiveness towards theories of the state has risen in the field in the wake of debates on an emerging "post-Westphalian" order, it seems only natural that the current interest in various concepts of "society" should ferment an interest towards sociological theories of society too. *On the other hand*, the observation that MST might play a particularly prominent role in this respect is driven by the perception that it provides one of the most fully developed contemporary theories of society which, in addition, does not take a concept of society tied to the framework of the nation state as its starting point, but conceives society as world society from the start.

Bringing together a comprehensive theoretical system such as the one developed by Luhmann with a more specific field of inquiry such as the study of international relations might at first seem like a futile exercise, which can possibly only be envisaged as subduing the latter under the former. Yet engaging with Luhmannian theorizing need not necessarily take the form of either a wholesale adoption or rejection of this body of theory. Selective uses can and should be made (cf. Albert 2002; but see Schmidt 2000: 21f). Nevertheless, seeing IR through systems theoretical lenses must not be understood as "applying" a systems theoretical approach to international relations. IR theory and a theory of society do not operate on a level playing field. In a sense which will be elaborated in more detail below, this also implies that MST does not provide a "superior" view on international relations (in fact it eschews the entire notion of scientific "progress" implied in such a notion), but merely a "different" one. Yet it is the main argument of this chapter that in offering such a different perspective, MST can contribute to further an understanding of a number of core problems of IR theorizing. Thus, while IR theory has set its focus on the search

for emerging forms of politics in a “post-Westphalian” world (cf. Walker 2000), while it has hotly debated the changing structures of an international system in an era of globalization, and while it has come to acknowledge that the changing qualities of social processes observed can be described as the development of an “international” or a “world society” rather than as internal transformations of an “international system” (cf. World Society Research Group 2000; Buzan and Little 2000), it arguably lacks the theoretical apparatus which would offer one (among a possible many) comprehensive description of these multi-faceted processes. Against this background, it is possible to draw on MST since it does not seek to combine the patchworks of global change into a coherent whole, but starts from a theory of world society and conceptualizes these patchworks as the result of a differentiation within and an evolution of that society. The perspective is thus utterly different: on the one hand, IR’s perspective on a society somehow built upon and emerging from an international system; on the other hand, MST’s perspective in which an international system of states might form an expression of some kind of internal differentiation of world society. While these perspectives might at first glance seem incompatible with one other, it is through an at least rudimentary rendition of the notions of “politics” and “power” as points of contact that an MST perspective can be accessed from an IR point of view.

In order to do so, the following section will briefly sketch some shortcomings in the IR theoretical debate on globalization and argue that these shortcomings need to be remedied by adopting a view on world society which unties the very concept of society from its meaning in classical sociological approaches. The next section will then briefly elaborate the radical shift in perspective that is entailed in MST in contrast to classical theories of society, thereby also introducing some central tenets of MST, particularly its notions of politics and power. The final section will then argue that although IR stands to benefit from MST, this does not constitute a one-way street and that IR in some sense can provide some correctives and addenda to MST also.

### **Thinking globalization thoroughly**

If anything, the heterogeneity of the debates on globalization and, intimately connected to it, “global governance” highlights that IR conceptualizations of processes of “global change” broadly conceived suffer from a lack of sufficiently elaborated points of contact between the analysis of an “international system” and the analysis of social change beyond the traditional purview of the field. Such a diagnosis might come as a surprise if the wealth of contributions is taken into account which point to the substantial reshaping of the discipline’s object of study (cf., for example, Smith *et al.* 1996; Albert *et al.* 2001). Thus, the international sphere is increasingly perceived to be not only inhabited by states, state-based organizations, or other public actors, but also to be co-constituted by increasing numbers of so-called “civil society” actors and networks, such as international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), transnational advocacy

networks, or, of a more recent origin, powerful transnational protest movements (see Cutler *et al.* 1999; Ronit and Schneider 2001). In addition, the legitimacy to use the state as “unit” of analysis is questioned as historical-sociological studies point to the contingencies of historical state forms (cf. Hobson 2000) and critical studies examine the cognitive and epistemological constructs which uphold the imagery of the sovereign state as a “timeless” given (cf. Biersteker and Weber 1996). Building on the insight that the contemporary international system is a far cry from the ordered realm which “realist” worldviews imagine it as, but rather resembles a “fragmegrated” or “bifurcated” (Rosenau 1997) amalgamation of actors, structures, and processes, the more optimistic projections of emerging forms of “global governance” (Kaul *et al.* 1999) or a “global public policy” (Reinicke 1998) are supplemented by a profound skepticism as to the very possibility of political and other forms of regulation in such a complex system (cf. Rosenau 2000; Betts 2000). First of all, however, what has been highlighted by the heterogeneous and bifurcated nature of the debates surrounding the notion of “globalization” in the discipline, is something resembling a kind of “embedded” crisis in its own identity as a discipline (cf. Dunne *et al.* 1998). While a questioning and transgression of disciplinary boundaries can in fact be seen to further rather than obstruct the reproduction of the discipline (cf. Lapid 2001), dealing with globalization nonetheless puts into doubt the discipline’s *raison d’être*, i.e. the notion of an “international system” as something different from the realms of politics and/or society in general. The difficulties surrounding attempts to continue to describe a complex subject matter as an “international system,” where the specifics of the “international” become less and less visible and the “system” remains non-theorized or, at best, mostly conceptualized on the level of simple cybernetic systems only (cf. Jervis 1997: 29ff), may partly explain why the discipline has recently moved to look for new comprehensive analytic concepts to describe its subject matter. Thus, for example, the (renewed) attention which notions of “international” and “world society” receive from research done in the English School tradition (cf. Buzan 1993) points to the fragility which enshrines the idea of an “international system” as a system of states. Nonetheless, although the notions of “international” and “world society” point to an increasing openness towards adapting the IR vocabulary to the complexities of global structures and processes in and beyond the state system, it seems fair to say that in this context the very concept of “society” remains as much undertheorized as that of the “system” in notions of the “international system.” Put differently: while they increasingly acknowledge that there is some kind of society “out there” which transgresses national boundaries and which might provide a rich ground for conceptualizing and envisioning a comprehensive view on global change, theories of international relations pay only scant attention to *theories of society*. There is a basic problem here, however, in that it might be argued that this scant attention is due less to a lack of interest in theories of society and more to the necessity of preserving a disciplinary identity. To put the argument in a nutshell: if there is such a thing as “world society” out there, then the idea of enclosed “national” societies – or better: national



“state–society” complexes – which underpin the very notion of “international relations” becomes highly problematic. And arguably most uses of the concept of “society” in IR accounts of “international” or “world” society have reacted to this need to preserve a disciplinary identity by avoiding the question of which notion, and accordingly, which theory of society is appropriate for studying a world society. However, this avoidance must not be read as if IR scholars do not have an idea about what society is at all. Yet, this idea is mostly limited to a largely uncritical adoption of a classical notion of “society” which is intimately linked to the nation state (“methodological nationalism” in Ulrich Beck’s sense; cf. Beck 2002).

A “classical notion of society” in this case refers to sociological theories which see society as something integrated by shared norms and a collective identity – i.e. most theories of society from Durkheim, Simmel, and Weber, over Parsons, and up to Habermas (cf. Kneer *et al.* 2001). While the core question of these theories is how society is held together in the face of disintegrative tendencies inherent in processes of rationalization, modernization, and individualization, their standard answer ascribes this integrative potential to some form of community (there are good overviews by Cohen (1985) and Giesen (1999)). Only then do answers diverge regarding the question of what makes this community an integrated and integrating one, placing an emphasis, for example, on shared values, on a shared national and/or ethnic identity, on a shared legal/constitutional framework, etc. Yet all these theories exhibit two structural flaws which limit their use for conceptualizing a “world society.” On the one hand, they build the notion of society on historically contingent processes such as the construction of a collective identity and the formation of enclosed national legal systems (*Rechtsstaat*) which underpin the evolution of modern nation states in the nineteenth century (see Schulze 1994; Ferguson and Mansbach 1996). On the other hand, they systematically exclude from the notion of society social facts which cannot be subsumed under its integrative umbrella. The latter move is particularly pronounced in the English School’s use of a classic notion of society as a normatively integrated realm in relation to a “society of states,” where strategic behavior that cannot be constructed as rule-following behavior is relegated to the (more “basic”) realm of the “international system” which is not part of society (cf. Buzan 1993). Such a move arguably mirrors a basic problem of classic theories of society. This can be illustrated referring to some colloquial figures of speech regarding, for example, the place of criminals in society: criminals are “excluded from” society, society must be “shielded from” them, prisoners need to be “reintegrated into” society – yet if a theory of society seeks to describe social processes in a comprehensive fashion, it must exactly be able also to describe, for example, criminality and more generally disintegrative tendencies within society rather than exclude them from society per definition. It is in this respect that most attempts to employ the notion of “society” in relation to the contemporary complex, bifurcated global system remain flawed. “World society” is conceived as something which exists next to national societies, but, through a common commitment to global problems, is based on the same basic dynamic of a

normative integration (see Bull 1995 [1977]); an “international society” of states is equally set apart from national societies, yet represented according to an image corresponding to the model of a national society. What is missing, in other words, is a notion and a theory of world society which sees the global system as a whole and which does not relegate non-integrated or non-integrative processes to an “outside” of society, but includes them as phenomena to be accounted for within a theory of society. Equally, any theory of world society which takes seriously the many transgressions of national boundaries which constitute globalizing processes and which have been studied in great detail in the discipline of IR must not construct world society as something existing “next to” national societies (or, for that matter, an international system or an international society), but must be able to account for the existence of nation states and the persisting prominence of the semantic figure of “national societies” within world society.

It is in this sense that engaging with MST is proposed here to students of international relations. MST conceives of world society as the only society existing today and as the highest-order social system possible; “international relations” can thus not be seen as something external to world society, but needs to be conceived as part and parcel of such a society.

### **MST and world society, power and politics**

For MST, all social systems are constituted by a difference between system and environment and are communicative systems (cf. Luhmann 1997a: 35). Communication, as the combination of information and understanding, forms the basic operation of social systems (see Luhmann 1995c). In contrast to sender–receiver models which ascribe communicative “acts” to persons, perlocutors (see, for example, Deutsch 1966: 86ff), etc., communication here is conceptualized as being produced and reproduced in recursive networks of communication. A recursive network defines the unity of a system. Taking up the insights on self-referentiality and autopoiesis originally developed in the natural sciences by Maturana, Varela and others, communication is thus seen as being produced within the system alone. No communication “enters” a system without it being observed and selected and thus “produced” within the system itself. “Action” and “causality” in such a view then do not form basic non-communicative processes in society, but rather are merely forms of observation and communicative ascriptions of action and causality within social systems (cf. Baecker 2001: 59ff). If social systems are constituted by communication and by communication alone, then society is the highest-order social system which comprises all communication. There is no communication outside of society or between society and systems in its environment. In order to establish what society as the comprehensive system being formed by and comprising all communication “is,” it is thus not possible to draw on any form of membership or a population, a geographic feature, or for that matter, any externality not constituted by communication: the notion of “society” in Modern Systems

Theory is “radically constructivist” (Luhmann 1997a: 35). The “full discovery of the globe as a closed sphere of meaningful communication” (Luhmann 1997a: 148), i.e. the general possibility of all communication being addressable for other communication, then means that today there can be only one society thus understood, namely world society.

This however quite radically shifts the focus of a theory of society. A social system which comprises all communication cannot in any meaningful way be understood in the sense of forming a unity, let alone an integrated one. The central problem for a theory of society thus changes from the question of how society is held together to the question of how it is differentiated internally: “the real challenge for the theory of world society is to show how extreme inequalities can be analyzed as internal differentiation of a social system” (Stichweh 2000a: 31f). In other words, the “puzzle” to be tackled is not how something stable and seemingly given is stabilized and reproduced as an integrated whole, but how, given the complexity of communication and given that any communicative act can be accepted or rejected (and thus communication can continue or not), communication does continue and more or less stable societal forms do evolve. While “disseminating media” (such as writing, print media, etc.) are a precondition for successful communication, there is then still the problem of how the success of communication can be ensured, particularly the acceptance of “uncomfortable” communication (such as an obligation to pay), given that for society as a whole this can less and less be achieved through religion and commonly shared values. In this respect, symbolically generalized media of communication assume a central role. Through the generation of media specific for function systems, such as money in the economic system, truth in the scientific system, or power in the political system, they provide a “functional equivalent to the usual normative insurance of societal cohesion” (Luhmann 1997a: 316). These media condition the probabilities of acceptance and rejection of communication and motivate its acceptance, thereby increasingly replacing a morality which is unable to do so under the condition of differentiated function systems (Luhmann 1997a: 371). Thus, for example, in the economic system communication can only be connected to, and successful if conditioned and motivated in and through, the medium “money.”

A theory of society in this sense does not seek to explain some kind of homogeneity of the social, but how this society somehow hangs together despite its inhomogeneity (cf. Stichweh 2000a: 14, 31). Thus understood, world society achieves its unity only through its internal differentiation, not through any integrative moment. In contrast to stratified or segmentarily differentiated societies (emphasis on the plural), contemporary society (emphasis on the singular) is primarily differentiated functionally. Each functional subsystem of society, such as law, politics, economy, religion, etc., is characterized by a specific function, a specific code, and a specific medium. Yet there is no overarching normative framework that would allow one to conceive of world society as an integrated whole; it achieves its unity solely through its internal differentiation. In particular, this also means that no single function system assumes the responsibility of integrating society, a role traditionally ascribed to the political system.

Like all other social systems, the political system of world society can only be defined through its specific differentiation against its environment. This particularly means that any definition of an essence of “the political” is excluded. Instead of an ontological question, for a difference-theoretical approach the correct question is:

how does the political system distinguish itself? Thus, the question is not objectivist: what is the character of the political’s essence?, but constructivist: how do communications produce themselves as political communications, how do they, in the actualization of recursive networkings, detect the political character of other communications when there are so many non-political communications within society? This is but another form of the question: How is an operative closure of a political system on the basis of a political implication of specific operations possible?

(Luhmann 2000a: 81).

Political communication is differentiated from other communication in society by a specific medium, a specific function, and a specific code (Luhmann 2000a: 17):

The specific medium of political communication is *power*. Yet within the given theoretical context, power needs to be conceptualized in a fundamentally different way than in most traditional theories which, one way or another, rely on some notion of (for example, structural) causality or intentionality (of those bearing power) (cf. Luhmann 2000a: 26). In contrast, power is code-driven communication (Luhmann 1988d: 15). Power in this sense forms the symbolically generalized medium of communication for the political system. As such, political power of course is about influence, yet “influence is and remains dependent on the articulation of social communication. What is not communicated cannot be obeyed.... The relation to influence lies in the symbolic use of actions, not in the facticity of them taking place” (Luhmann 2000a: 40). As political power, the medium relies on a form of influence based on negative sanctions, negative understood here in a double sense: in contrast to positive sanctions (usually applied in the economic system); and negative in the sense that “the medium which is based on them is reliant on their *non-use*” (Luhmann 2000a: 46). Put very simply, power is reliant on the regular non-use of sanctions. It functions only by constructing a “presence of the absent,” i.e. the mutual knowledge of both sides that the alternative to avoid the use of negative sanction is mutually preferred. The medium “power” thus is the presence of the excluded. Power needs to be symbolized, the police need to appear, the military to be visibly placed into barracks, not to “enforce” power, but to prevent permanent challenges to their symbolism. Power breaks down only at the moments in which it is challenged and does not or is not able to react in a proper fashion: “Typically, it is minimal events which can spark revolutions” (Luhmann 2000a: 48). Not the use of the means of power, i.e. physical force, but the capacity to credibly threaten their use enables the symbolic generalization of the medium and the reproduction of its forms (cf. Luhmann 2000a: 53).

Of course, power is not political power *per se*, but can become specified as the latter only on the basis of the emergence and operative closure of a political system. In accounting for the possibility of the latter, i.e. answering the question of what the specifics are that allow political communication to produce political communication and recognize other communication as political communication, Luhmann distinguishes between the function of the political and the code of the medium power (cf. Luhmann 2000a: 81ff). Regarding the function of the political, it is important to note that accounts which simply list various functions or derive it from some set of values only form a part of the political system's self-description (i.e. of political theories as theories within the system), yet cannot be satisfactory from the standpoint of a theory of society which needs to account for the "unity of the connection between function and system. If one seeks to avoid both value-laden as well as plurifunctional definitions, then the possibility remains to refer to the *provision of capacities for collectively binding decision*" (Luhmann 2000a: 84). As the system's function, this implies that all politics is decision (and be it in the form to decide not do decide); yet, it still leaves open the question of how political communication connects to other communication as political communication. For that, "power needs to be coded in a specific fashion, namely by dividing it into a positive and a negative position of superiority and inferiority respectively" (Luhmann 2000a: 88).

It is important to note that on the one hand this code is specific for the medium of the system in question, and on the other it is purely formal in the sense that it does not in any way predetermine other codes. The former means that all operations in the political system are primarily coded in the medium of power (and thus the political does not *primarily* base itself on the symbolically generalized communication media of truth or legality, for example). The latter implies that if the basal code of power-superior/power-inferior in the political system is nowadays expressed in a code government/opposition, then this code provides possible forms to express political communication by also providing the necessary potential to somehow "negate" that communication, but it does not prejudice for or against specific forms on the basis of the code (in other words, the opposition can be against the government in relation to something, yet this does not in any way prejudice that it will take the same stance on a similar subject in another case – in which in fact the government might adopt the same position only to find that the opposition is positioned against it again; put more formally: "the positive value 'government' is the designative value of the system, the negative value 'opposition' is its reflexive value" (Luhmann 2000a: 99)).

## **IR as the politics of world society?**

Before inquiring into possible theoretical fertilizations emerging from a Modern Systems Theory of (world) society for the understanding and conceptualization of international relations, it is necessary to again reflect on some fundamental issues in this respect.

As a theory of society, Modern Systems Theory is *not* about a different, maybe a more comprehensive, subject matter compared to IR. One could thus argue that there is no substantial barrier which prevents a transplantation of MST concepts to IR, and students of IR who take an interest in “societal” issues, structures and influences could readily borrow from MST. Yet, the difference between Modern Systems Theory as a theory of society and most IR theories is not one of scope, but one of kind. It is different in kind regarding “what” is observed and “how” it is observed. The difference in “what” is observed necessarily follows from systems theory’s radically constructivist, a-humanist (by seeing society as constituted by communication and not by persons) and anti-regionalist (by ascribing a primacy to functional differentiation) stance. If all social systems – including the observation of these systems which, for example, as part of the operations of the scientific system are also communication and thus part of society – are constituted by communication and communication alone, then this forms a radically different way of constructing a theory from the way in which most, if not all, theories of international relations base themselves on a number of core assumptions of “what” the international system consists of. This particularly refers to the role played by causality in this respect. While arguably causal explanations play a prominent role in IR theory, Modern Systems Theory, while in no way denying the existence of causality, conceives of it as a scheme of observation:

the selection of causal factors to be taken into account and of those not to be taken into account ... is done by the observers. Accordingly, one needs to observe those observers in order to assert which causes effect which effects, and today no “nature” will guarantee that there will be a consensus on this. Causal judgments are “political” judgements.

(Luhmann 1997a: 1011)

The difference regarding “how” the observation operates refers to the order of observation. Whereas (the academic discipline of) International Relations as part of the operation of the scientific system observes international relations, understood as operations within specific social systems which are constructed to form “international relations,” a Modern Systems Theory of society as outlined here also observes how IR observes (and thus co-constructs) international relations. Thus understood, IR is primarily observed as a theory which partly works within the “system” of IR.<sup>1</sup> The difference might be illustrated in relation to the difference between a legal theory and a theory of law. A legal theory forms a part of the legal system; it is part of how the system observes itself and thus constructs the grounds of validity of legal norms. A theory of law is about the operation of the legal system within society, it includes an account of how the construction of validity within the legal system works through the self-description of the legal system through legal theories (see Luhmann 1993a). The same could be said for the difference between political theory and a theory of politics, economic theory and a theory of economy, etc. In IR, the difference becomes most clear in relation

to realist theories; these do not provide theories of international relations as theories of international relations within world society, but form part of how the political system of world society (if for the time being we assume that to be coterminous with an “international political system”) observes itself, i.e. they form the everyday “background theory” about how international politics work within the political system. Taking such a perspective also helps to understand the seemingly bifurcated state of theoretical debate within the discipline: within IR (as an operation within the scientific system), international relations are indeed observed on at least two orders of observation: some that do observe international relations and some that observe international relations by also observing how “contending” approaches observe international relations. The latter is to be found in much of the “critical” and “postmodernist” contributions to IR theory and partly accounts for the recurrent perception of a “failure” regarding a “substantial” theoretical debate between different theoretical approaches (cf. Keohane 1988). One could indeed go so far as to say that to ask critical theoretical approaches to devise “substantial research programs” is to ask them *not* to observe how IR observes international relations (and thus to commit a categorical error). The seeming bifurcation is further reinforced by the circumstance that, theoretically speaking, “international relations” do not form a system at all: “the notion of an international system is ... unclear since one neither knows exactly what a nation is, nor receives a demonstration of how an ‘inter’ can be a system” (Luhmann 1997a: 159f, fn 218). But how can international relations be conceived in a MST framework then?

The political system forms one of society’s subsystems, functionally differentiated from other subsystems. Unlike most other function systems, *internally* the political system of world society is observed to be primarily differentiated in a segmentary fashion, i.e. segmented into territorial states (cf. Luhmann 2000a: 220ff). Thus, for MST the political system of world society is essentially a system of states. However, it is important to note that when MST deals with the political system, the realm usually associated with “international politics” features only marginally in its observations. Indeed, when MST observes the political system, it primarily observes the politics within modern industrialized states. On a purely empirical basis, to arrive at a systems theoretical conceptualization of international relations would thus first of all require it to account for a whole range of operations within the political system of world society which up to now have been observed by IR, yet not by MST. What thus appears on the horizon is a potentially fruitful exchange between IR and MST, where the latter can provide a theoretical frame to the former, yet the former can provide a wealth of empirical addenda to the latter’s conceptualization of world society’s political system. The possibility of such an exchange might be illustrated using the relation between functional and regional differentiation as an example:

Even though Modern Systems Theory clearly ascribes a primacy to territoriality as the main form of differentiation *within* the political system, it remains rather silent as to the relations which territoriality bears to the concept of “space.” This comes as no surprise given that territorial boundaries circum-

scribing states may be represented spatially, yet are conceived primarily in their function as enablers and interruptors of communication, or, more precisely: as part of the forms through which the political system observes itself. Regarding other function systems of world society (with the possible exception of the legal system), and particularly in relation to world society as a whole, regional-spatial differentiation (of which a differentiation along territorial lines forms but a specific case) is a form of differentiation secondary to functional differentiation. Regarding the notion of a "region," it is important to note that within a systems theoretical conceptualization of society *all* concepts of regionality are of little analytical value when they base definitions and delineations of regionality on some ontological attribute. In a theory of society understood as a theory of communication, only constructivist notions of "region" provide a proper mode of relating it to media of communication (cf. Bahrenberg and Kuhm 1998: 202). Regions thus can, but need not be understood spatially. Space forms a medium of communication which nonetheless does not signify the boundaries of social systems. It forms a "medium for perception and social communication, which is based on guiding distinctions of objects and places and of distance and proximity and which, as such a medium, undoubtedly loses its form-forming effect in modernity" (Stichweh 2000a: 190).

In regulating "access" to the function system (i.e. how persons are addressed by them), spatial boundaries are replaced by rules of inclusion and exclusion which are not necessarily defined spatially (see Nassehi 1997; Stichweh 1997). Rather, exclusions (such as those in the economic system, manifesting themselves in poverty) are less and less clearly differentiated spatially, nor necessarily linked to, for example, political exclusion.

It thus seems fair to say that there is a void of space and region in MST and thus a void in relation to the diagnosed primary form of differentiation which characterizes the political system of world society. Of course, this void may be a theoretically necessary one if in MST's view of world society a primacy is assigned to functional differentiation. It is here where a theoretical and an empirical observation might possibly clash: if it could be argued empirically that even beyond the political system regional differentiation assumes a primacy over a functional differentiation of world society, then the empirical validity of the very concept of world society might be put into doubt and arguably be replaced by a view of the global system which starts from the premise of a continued existence of many societies. These may then very well interact, yet would not have led to the emergence of world society as one social system. While the relation between functional and regional-segmentary differentiation within world society, but also within the political system of world society, thus forms problematic points within MST's view of the world, a number of conceptual remedies have been proposed. Bahrenberg and Kuhm (1998) argue that there might be regional differences in the mode in which functional differentiation constitutes the main form of differentiation in world society. Broadly within this line of thought, Mascareno (2000) has argued in respect to Latin America that there might be regions of world society where the operative closure of some function systems of



world society has not taken place yet and in which the political and/or the economic system in particular interrupt the other systems' self-reference to a degree which obstructs their evolution into operatively closed subsystems. While such an account indeed gives some weight to regional differentiation in Modern Systems Theory, it is at first sight not clear how such an empirically plausible observation can be reconciled with the main theoretical thesis of a functional differentiation of *world* society into operatively closed function systems.

It might of course be possible to account for the persistence of a multiplicity of "societies" under the condition of a functional differentiation of world society if the latter is seen as a social system which is still emerging and not operatively closed yet. Such an interpretation is suggested by Helmut Willke's (2001) proposal not to talk of a "world society," but of "lateral world systems." In Willke's eyes, it is not the general *possibility* of communication to connect to all other communication which is constitutive of world society; what would be constitutive of such a world society (and what is constitutive of "lateral world systems") is the actual reference to "world," i.e. global contexts, in specific social systems – and this can, in Willke's view, be observed in the financial system, for example, but not in the political system.

To reiterate the conceptual ambiguity: if world society is conceived in the Luhmannian sense as being constituted by the fact that all communication can connect to all other communication, that, so to speak, the "world" is embedded or implied in each communication, and if this world society achieves its unity only through its internal differentiation which is primarily a functional differentiation between its subsystems, then it makes no sense to speak of societies in the plural. Any kind of regional differentiation can only be observed to form some kind of secondary differentiation, supplementing functional differentiation, but not disrupting the operative autonomy of world society's function systems. If, on the other hand, a permanent empirical actualization of the reference to "world," i.e. a *de facto* connection of communication to communication is seen to be constitutive for world society, then one might find Willke's view to be more plausible, according to which this state of affairs is only achieved in a few function systems, and particularly not in the political system. Under such a perspective, it might be legitimate to talk about an emergent world society which indeed is differentiated functionally; yet, for some function systems regional differentiation retains such a primacy, possibly even disrupting the operative closure of the respective function system of world society, so that it might still be more adequate to talk about societies in the plural.

Quite obviously both views have diverging implications for how international relations are conceived. From the Luhmannian perspective which sees world society as primarily differentiated functionally into operatively closed function systems, there *are no international relations in any meaningful sense of the term*. International relations could, at most, be seen to describe operations in the political system of world society which internally is primarily differentiated regionally/territorially. In contrast, a view as espoused by Willke would arguably leave international relations "intact," given that world society as a social system

primarily differentiated functionally is seen as a system in emergence, yet not fully established given a continued primacy of territorial differentiation.

Yet it is exactly at this theoretical junction within MST that it is possible to turn around and ask about the possible contribution of IR to MST, rather than vice versa.

### **Correctives to MST, IR, and vice versa**

Most IR research which is not situated within the limits of a narrow realist/structural realist framework, and particularly the majority of the globalization literature in the field, can be seen to provide a corrective to the MST perception of a continued primacy of territorial differentiation *within* the political system of world society. Of course, most IR perspectives would concur with MST that the political system of world society observes itself and thus “is” a system of states. Yet the vast amount of research on international regimes in the neoliberal-institutionalist tradition combined with the newer constructivist research agenda shows that international politics can no longer be described as the mere interaction of foreign policies, but can be conceived as *functional politics* in the sense that it orients political processes towards the processing of functionally defined problems – and not towards the pursuit of interests ascribed to actors.<sup>2</sup> This perception is reinforced by the empirical observation of an increasing *denationalization* of the perception of the relevant problems for political action (cf. Beisheim *et al.* 1999), as well as by the observation of an increasing density of functionally specific regulatory regimes through processes of legalization (cf. Goldstein *et al.* 2000). Although it is a difficult if not impossible task to determine a “threshold value” at which a functional differentiation assumes a primacy over regional differentiation within the political system of world society, the combined insights of much post-realist IR research can be read to point to a steadily increasing importance of functional differentiation within world society. IR thus does not invalidate MST’s observation of the political system of world society as being a system of states, but rather supplements it by highlighting that the political system is a system of states *plus* a system of functional international institutions.

If thus understood contributions from IR provide possible correctives to an MST view on world society and its political system, why then, it might be legitimate to ask, not leave it at this and assume that the IR–MST relation forms an intellectual one-way street? Why go further and seek to embed an observation of IR in an MST observation? What is the “value added”?

First of all, and going back to the points raised above regarding the need to “think globalization thoroughly,” MST offers a well-developed theoretical framework which allows us to insert processes observed by IR into a meaningful whole (without requiring any notion of an “integrated whole” for that purpose). Thus, for example, the notion of operatively autonomous function systems helps us to conceptualize the relation between the political and the economic system of world society, as well as the synchronicity of processes of regional differentiation

(through international organization and in the system of states) and functional differentiation (through international institutionalization) within the political system, *without* having to resort to theoretically shaky ideas such as a simultaneity of “contradictory” tendencies or the notion of a dialectic as driving social changes. What MST and its notion of a “world society” require and offer is to see these seemingly divergent or even contradictory trends as developments which can and must be accounted for within a theory of world society without leading to theoretical stopgaps or dead ends. State collapses and new state formations, the simultaneous occurrence of globalization/denationalization and regionalization, the dynamics of international cooperation through institutionalization and international conflict must not be collapsed analytically into a complex muddle of a chaotic and bifurcated international system, but can be described more aptly as instances of world societal differentiation, i.e. the differentiation into functional subsystems and the interplay of functional and regional forms of differentiation on various system levels (function system-organization) as well as within the single function systems.

Rather than conflating the operations of the political and of the economic system into an “international political economy” or juxtaposing economics and politics as spheres of contending “interests,” a focus on the operative autonomy of politics and economics as self-referential systems allows a sharper focus on the *limits* of politics under the condition of economic communication being produced by an observation within the economic system alone. By unambiguously identifying, on the level of world society’s function systems, international politics to form operations within the political system of world society, MST provides a focus on the functioning of international politics through the medium of power, if the latter is relieved from forming a medium in other systems and seen as specific for the political system, and helps to give a clearer understanding of the possibilities, but particularly the limits of politics in world society, specifically the prospects of “global governance.” While MST in no way denies that political regulation continually takes place and has effects, it offers a strong theoretical argument regarding the impossibility of regulating the operations of one function system (e.g. economics) by another (i.e. politics) if regulation is seen as an activity in which certain ends are to be achieved causally by certain means (cf. Luhmann 1989b). All regulation of the operations of function systems is self-regulation; a political action is only observed by the economic system on the basis of its own operational code, i.e. monetary value. The only question then is whether a complex strategy of regulation can condition how the economic system observes political communication. While in fact there have been attempts to devise a theory of regulating complex social systems on an MST basis (cf. Willke 1998a; Görlitz and Burth 1998), MST first of all points to the extremely high demands required for successful political regulation. From a theoretical point of view, then, attempts to formulate theories and comprehensive strategies of “global governance” and/or “global public policy” must seem like futile *theoretical* exercises and rather can be observed as forms and programs of observation within the political system. A similar sharpening of the analytic

focus regarding a notion central to, yet notoriously undertheorized in IR can arguably be seen to emerge from MST's conceptualization of "power" as a symbolically generalized medium of communication and form of observation within the political system of world society (cf. Luhmann 2000a: 27ff). In fundamental opposition to most concepts of power as employed in IR, MST points out that power can not be understood as a capability of something or someone, but needs to be conceived as code-driven communication (cf. Luhmann 1988d: 15). For power to function as such a medium, i.e. to ensure the connectivity of communication, it needs to be credible. This credibility of power depends on its symbolization and the exceptionality of the use of negative sanctions. Thus, for example, from a systems theoretical point of view one might suspect that what IR realists observe to constitute the core of state power, i.e. military capabilities, would primarily serve the function of symbolizing power. Yet, in order to successfully operate as a medium of communication (so that the system can observe, for example, that there is a "unilateral" moment in contemporary world politics based on the USA's military capabilities; cf. Albert 2001b), this power must not be utilized too frequently. In this sense, a constant deployment of force, a regular resort to military intervention interrupts the functioning of the political system's symbolically generalized medium of communication. War is not the continuation of politics but with other means, it is a potential disruption of the political system's autopoiesis.

Equally, the political system's operative closure could not be ensured without reference to a binary code. The difference between government and opposition provides a coding required to ensure the function of providing the capacities for collectively binding decisions. The code fulfills all attributes of a preference coding. One participates in the government rather than in the opposition. Only the government can fill those positions on which a collectively binding decision is possible. The opposition can but lament, criticize, articulate demands, and, in general, reflect the contingency of all political decisions. The positive value "government" is the system's designative value, the negative value "opposition" is the system's reflexive value (cf. Luhmann 2000a: 99).

The system creates indeterminacies necessary for its operative closure through political elections. While of course there is neither a "government" nor an "opposition," nor do political elections take place in the political system of world society, the vocabulary of MST allows us to observe and re-conceive developments in this system under such a perspective by asking for functional equivalents (cf. also Albert 2004). Particularly by combining, on the one hand, the "IR-inspired" observation made above, that a primacy of territorial differentiation within the political system of world society is waning against an increasing functional differentiation, with the observation, on the other hand, that no government/opposition distinction is emerging on a system-wide level, it becomes possible to reconstruct the East-West conflict as having served that central function for the operative closure of the political system of world society. While it is less clear at present as to whether or which code has replaced it, one might suspect that we are in midst of a phase of system-wide perturbations and

selections, which have as yet not led to discernable evolutionary restabilizations. Yet it is important to bear in mind that these selections and restabilizations are an evolutionary process taking place within the political system of world society and can in no way be introduced from the outside (by diagnosing the existence or emergence of old or new binary codes, such as a “clash of civilizations”).

### **Thinking IR theory sociologically**

Observing IR from the standpoint of MST and vice versa extends a double invitation: an invitation to think IR theory sociologically, and an invitation for MST to observe developments in the political system as described by the discipline of International Relations. Yet, IR theory and a theory of (world) society are and remain two different things, an observation of the political system of world society on the one hand, and an observation of world society on the other. It should be made clear, however, that against the radically constructivist and post-ontological background of MST, different “orders” of observation do not provide “better” accounts or penetrate more deeply into an “essence” as others. MST forms a second-order observation of IR if it also observes how IR observes international relations. If IR observes how MST observes international relations, it adopts a mode of second-order observation in relation to MST. The present contribution forms a second-order observation in relation to IR and MST. But only on the basis of ontological worldviews and empiricist epistemologies, associated with a modernist ideology of scientific progress, can this appear to be an unsatisfactory state of affairs. The sociological view proposed by MST would simply assert that a permanent drawing of distinctions and second-order observations is a precondition for the continued operation of self-referential social systems and thus in fact the driving force of the scientific system’s evolution.

However, despite its difficulty and seeming inaccessibility which, from a more “conventional” IR point of view, MST might be seen to share, for example, with much of the poststructural critique that became prominent in the discipline since the 1990s, MST’s radical constructivism also provides points of contact with IR which seem less obvious in other, purely “metatheoretical” approaches. MST’s radical constructivism asserts that all communication, including scientific communication, is part of, in fact co-constitutes (world) society and thus partakes in the endless movement of self-referentiality and observation. It thus transcends the boundaries between the empirical, the theoretical, and the metatheoretical. “International politics” can thus be observed not as an empirical realm in need of some “external” theoretical explanation which can then in turn be examined through the lenses of metatheory. Rather, “international politics” can be observed as operations within the political system which as such reproduce this function system’s self-referentiality, which as such contributes to the operation and evolution of society and the modes of knowing which are – as communication within society – intrinsic to it. Vice versa, MST provides a rich vocabulary through which international politics can be observed and replaced in conceptual frameworks which may seem unusual to the IR scholar at first, but which bear

potentially rich fruit when it comes to assess, for example, the limits and possibilities of politics in a global system. In so doing, MST provides *a* comprehensive view of the world to which IR can profitably relate itself, given the arguable lack of any such comprehensive theoretical framework in contemporary IR theory. It is hardly necessary to say that MST's radically constructivist stance, however, prevents it from proposing itself as *the* comprehensive view.

## **Notes**

- 1 Ole Wæver proposed that one could thus say that "IR = Observing it"; see also Albert 2001a.
- 2 For exemplary overviews of the regime and the constructivist agendas, see Hasenclever *et al.* 1997; Fierke and Jørgensen 2001.

### 3 **Politics, Modern Systems Theory and the critical purpose of International Relations Theory**

*Thomas Diez*

#### **Late encounter: Niklas Luhmann and International Relations Theory**

The story of Niklas Luhmann and International Relations (IR) Theory is one of a late encounter. Since the mid-1980s, IR Theory (as most of the international social sciences) has been preoccupied by the Foucault–Habermas controversy. At the same time, one of German social theory’s main concerns has been with the exchange between Habermas and Luhmann. Despite the differences between the two debates, it is perhaps no coincidence that they have run in parallel, for the structuralism in some of Foucault’s works is not unlike the structuralism of Modern Systems Theory. As the debate about the future development of critical theory in IR Theory is running out of steam, some have turned their eyes to Luhmann’s work to see whether Modern Systems Theory, or at least aspects of it, can make any valuable contribution to our theorizing of international politics at a time when the “international” is undergoing fundamental change, while there is no consensus about whether this change has yet constituted a global space.<sup>1</sup>

Luhmann’s concept of world society offers a fruitful way to think about the international/global, as Mathias Albert makes clear in Chapter 2. As far as I can see, the value of an encounter between Modern Systems Theory and IR Theory lies primarily in: (a) the problematization of the nation state as the basic unit of political organization and international politics, and especially the idea that nations are normatively integrated; (b) the provision of a global framework for the analysis of an increasingly functionally organized society in which territorial demarcations become less important; and (c) the advancement of a radically constructivist epistemology, which however enables scientific engagement in the form of second-order observations.

Although Modern Systems Theory, or, as Albert suggests in Chapter 2, parts of its conceptual toolkit, may therefore fruitfully be employed in the study of contemporary international/global politics, I remain skeptical about how much we can gain from this encounter. My argument in this chapter is that the similarities between work loosely grouped under the “poststructuralism” label and Modern Systems Theory mean that we can do most of what Modern Systems

Theory would enable us to do on the basis of a different set of approaches that is already present in IR Theory, while we would lose the critical impetus provided by poststructuralism if we bought into Modern Systems Theory wholesale. This is, of course, not what the editors of this volume suggest, and so I am happy to explore further what is in Modern Systems Theory for IR. However, I would like to raise a cautionary note at this stage of the endeavor.

This is, of course, a very particular statement from a very particular point of view, and given the importance of context in both poststructuralism and Modern Systems Theory, I should make that particular trajectory clear. My interest in analyzing international, and specifically European, politics has always been driven by a critical concern. I agree with both Luhmann and Foucault that this critical concern cannot consist of setting a universal normative standard. Nonetheless, to my mind it is possible, although not unproblematic, to formulate a postmodern international ethics, which takes as its basis the very principle of diversity itself (see Diez 1996, 1997). Traditional I/international R/relations were not hostile to diversity as such; in fact, the principles of sovereignty and territoriality may in a Herderian manner be read as guaranteeing such diversity against imperial hegemony. But the combination of territoriality, sovereignty and diversity served as a straitjacket for diversity, and led to the now very familiar problem of strict inside/outside distinctions (cf. Walker 1993), and to logocentric and therefore, from a perspective of an ethics of diversity, questionable practices of exclusion and inclusion – the practices of “making foreign” (cf. Ashley and Walker 1990; Campbell 1998).

In contrast to this, the process of European integration provides an opportunity to reshape the classic solution to the diversity problem in international politics. The traditional way to see this process is as one of long-term state-building (cf. Caporaso 2000), and thus of eventually fitting “Europe” into the classic international system. Most of today’s European integration scholars, however, would dispute such teleology. To them, Europe is developing into a novel form of “postmodern governance” that defies purely territorial categories (see, for example Christiansen *et al.* 2001; Jachtenfuchs and Kohler-Koch 1996; Ruggie 1993; Schmitter 1996; Wiener 1998). We may thus be at a crucial juncture. The way European governance gets discursively constructed can proceed in a number of ways. It may move, as the traditionalists would have expected, towards a state-like structure or break apart into its state constituencies; or it may “invent” a new way of organizing politics beyond the nation state. In that respect, it seems to me that the construction of European governance as a network provides an alternative to the state-trajectory because its mode of legitimization is dominated by decentralized and multiple forms of direct participation in decision-making and the possibility to articulate diverse identities (cf. Diez 1996; 1997; Jachtenfuchs *et al.* 1998: 421f). Furthermore, although there is no doubt that such a construction of European governance is still marginal, traces of it are nonetheless increasingly observable in debates about the EU’s future (cf. Diez 1998; 1999a) – an example of this was a speech of Commission President Romano Prodi in the European Parliament, where he suggested that such a form of



network governance should be the prime future vision for the EU (cf. Prodi 2000).

But how can the debate be shifted towards this construction? Such a transformation rests on the day-to-day political practices of many – of those in influential political positions both in the member states and on the European level; of those bearing responsibility in sub- and transnational organizations; of those working in NGOs and pressure groups; of those making daily decisions in the bureaucracies; of those teaching European politics in universities, etc. It is this political practice that cannot be domesticated, and is always open for surprises. From a Foucauldian perspective, a central task of the social theorist is not to tell people what to do, but to open up the space for them to articulate their own identities and visions (cf. George 1995: 222). Nonetheless, the post-modern engagement is one with a pretty clear message: resist totalitarianisms, be they in the form of political ideologies or social technologies.

It is here that I see the biggest problem of using Modern Systems Theory as an inspiration for my own analysis of international relations. If one reads Foucault as a structuralist, taking on board Luhmann is perhaps a much more straightforward matter. However, there is a lot more room for agency in discursive accounts of international politics if they are conceptualized in a poststructuralist frame than there is in Modern Systems Theory. I realize that this is a critique from the outside, rather than from within Modern Systems Theory, which does not want to explain agency. Human beings, from the latter's point of view, are part of the environment of, and therefore a potential disturbance to social systems to the extent that humans as “psychic” systems interpenetrate social systems, and *vice versa* (cf. Luhmann 1984a: 291; 1997a: 744). This is not that far from the concept of a de-centered subject as conceptualized in the work of Judith Butler (1997) or Chantal Mouffe (1988: 35), both in their ways inspired by Foucault. However, because Foucault is read here primarily as a critical theorist, there is still agency in the de-centered subject (see Ashley 1989a), and there is therefore the possibility for, on this front, a much more traditional kind of ethics than one finds in Luhmann's work. Unsurprisingly, Foucauldians such as Rob Walker (1994) have been supportive of new social movements, whereas Luhmann himself remained much more skeptical. Ultimately, he observed these movements from his second-order point of observation – and therefore remained, in this context, a scientist, not an activist (cf. Reese-Schäfer 1992: 29). This is not a position a Foucauldian would take: the engagement of the scientist here remains a political, and in that sense an ethical, engagement.

This is a point to be revisited at a later stage of this chapter. Before doing so, I will first review the argument in favor of bringing Modern Systems Theory into IR. The third section then analyzes the similarities between poststructuralism and Modern Systems Theory in more detail. Following this, I will elaborate my skepticism as outlined above, and end with the suggestion to see Modern Systems Theory as a particular discourse of society with politico-ethical consequences. In Luhmann's terminology, my suggestion is to observe the observation

of international relations, although I suppose he would not have done so with a critical purpose. From such a perspective, Luhmann's systems theory seems to be driven by the very force that Roxanne Lynn Doty (2000) sees at work in Alexander Wendt's *Social Theory of International Politics* (Wendt 1999): a desire to domesticate the international within the mantle of science – or, in other words, to systemize international politics.

### **The argument for Luhmann in IR**

One of the crucial arguments for introducing Luhmann in IR is that his systems theory offers an understanding of world society that is radically different from competing conceptualizations in IR theory. To oversimplify a complex theory, society for Luhmann is a set of a number of diversified functional systems, such as law or the economy. Each of these systems comes into being through communication (and not through some grand normative foundation) and operates according to its own codes, with one basic code (such as legal/illegal in the case of law) at its heart. Systems are operatively closed in that they cannot make sense of the world outside their own codes. They are not, however, closed in the sense of merely looking inward, because it is crucial for their reproduction to communicate the boundaries of the system. In their observations of the outside world, in part provoked by interpenetration, they construct other systems according to their own codes, and not according to the codes of the observed system. Observation thus is a constructive and productive process, and there is no direct access to “the reality out there,” even though this reality is presupposed, as there would otherwise be nothing to observe (cf. Luhmann 1997a: 100–103).

Crucially, social systems (or most of them) are functionally and not territorially differentiated. In fact, politics and law are the only systems still territorially differentiated. But if society exists only as (and through) a conglomerate of systems, and if these systems because of their functional definition operate transnationally, society is only possible on a global scale – it is world society (cf. Albert 1999: 254). This allows us to conceptualize world society without recourse to territorial entities or a single normative foundation, both of which hamper the competing models currently available.

One such competing model is the notion of an international society as a society of states as one finds it in some versions of the English School (cf. Bull 1995 [1977]). This international society is global in scope, but its constitutive units are states, the definition of which is crucially linked to territory. It is thus a “weak” society that presupposes territorially defined states with a supposedly “stronger” society (the illusion of this strength has led to the phenomenon of states existing predominantly on the basis of their international recognition; see Jackson 1992). Any territorial definition such as this one, however, runs into the inside/outside problem alluded to above.

On the other hand, we have a conception of world society built around a set of evolving global norms. This, too, is present, although mostly as an only vaguely defined supplement, in the English School (see the chapter by Brown;

also Buzan 1993), but also in some sociological approaches, mostly emanating from the so-called Stanford School (see the chapter by Thomas; also Thomas 1999; Meyer *et al.* 1997). The works from this Stanford School illustrate the problems of this way of conceptualizing world society: They argue that we witness the spread and intensification of a world culture which, at a closer look, is mostly inspired by a set of values that may very broadly be characterized as Western, liberal, and Christian. As Richard Ashley (1989b) has shown in relation to global governance, however, such a “global culture” can only work on the grounds that it imposes specific identities, norms and purposes.

The spread of a world society through the development of a global culture would thus be imbued with power, despite the fact that such a global culture would be mediated in each locality under specific circumstances (cf. Buzan and Segal 1998). The only theory that allows for such a development without seeing it as an imposition is derived from the work of Jürgen Habermas. It rests on the idea of a global citizen who seeks consensus through argumentative rather than strategic action (cf. Held 1995; Risse 2000). This solution, however, easily runs into the very same problem of “imposing purpose”: not only is its feasibility questionable, it also underestimates the powerful force of discourse that defines the possibilities of what is allowed within a conversation even before arguments have been voiced.

Luhmann’s world society does not fall, at least at first sight, either into the “territorial trap” (Agnew 1994a: 101f), or into the normative trap. The systems of Modern Systems Theory are constituted and reproduced by a non-territorial force, communication – not a single norm within a particular territorial space, be it given or discursively “agreed” upon. This allows us to do justice to the increasing functionalization of world politics in the age of supposed globalization, and allows us to theorize the societal on a global level, as well as its tensions with the simultaneous stubbornness of international society, without having to postulate a single normative foundation. To conceptualize society in such a way would reorient our research of international politics, and would also add to the undermining of the fiction of independent national societies (see Albert 2002 for an excellent example).

### **The move from Foucault to Luhmann**

The most prominent contribution to the introduction of Luhmann to IR Theory is Mathias Albert’s *Millennium* article, “Observing world politics” (Albert 1999). Albert’s previously most famous work has been a standard reference piece within the German IR debate on poststructuralism and IR (cf. Albert 1994). As I have argued above, this is no coincidence. There are some important affinities between Luhmann’s systems theory and a structuralist reading of Foucault’s (in particular his early) work. There are three areas of overlap: the work of both Luhmann and Foucault displays an epistemological anti-foundationalism; it displays an ontological anti-foundationalism; and as a consequence, it analyzes the ways in which we make sense of a complex world. These three areas of

overlap can be illustrated by the status of theory and knowledge in general; the skepticism towards a single normative ground; and the operation of social systems/discourses according to internal rules.

### ***The status of knowledge***

Luhmann is, in his own characterization, a radical constructivist (see Luhmann 1990a). This has little in common with what passes nowadays in IR Theory for constructivism (e.g. Adler 1997; Checkel 1998; for criticisms see Guzzini 2000a; Zehfuss 1998, 2002). The latter's strategic attempt to "seize" the theoretical "middle ground" (cf. Adler 1997) is based on the ontological proposition that there is no given social reality, coupled with a denial of the importance of epistemological questions for social science (cf. Risse-Kappen 1995b: 173). By contrast, the constructivism that inspires Luhmann is primarily concerned with questions of knowledge (e.g. Schmidt 1987, 1992). In this perspective, the role of science in society is to observe (for instance, "world politics"), where observation is not a passive process of receiving and mirroring reality, but an active process of "distinguishing and naming" (Luhmann 1990a: 73). Scientific observation, within IR as much as any observation, is thus a productive process in that it generates a model of world politics (see Luhmann 1997a: 67).

This is a familiar story. Richard Ashley, for instance, has pointed out that IR Theory is not depicting a reality of international relations, but is entangled in international politics through reproducing territorial state units and a dangerous anarchical world outside the state (cf. Ashley 1988). Most of the work done from what has been labeled a "poststructuralist" perspective has subsequently been concerned with this kind of second-order observation of the discipline within the discipline, whereas social constructivists went on to explain or understand the outside world (cf. Diez 1999b). The most important source of Ashley and others has been the work of Foucault and his insistence that "the world is not an accomplice of our knowledge," and that discourse, rather than being based on "things," must be conceptualized as "a practice which we impose on them" (Foucault 1984: 127). "Knowledge" is thus produced in discourses. As in Modern Systems Theory, there is of course a material world outside, but we can never know objectively about this world; we can only know "things" through the models that we produce in the systems of knowledge that we are embedded in (cf. Foucault 1981: 295–296). Knowledge, systemic or discursive, is therefore based on an "originary violence," forcing reality into a particular construction of reality (cf. Daly 2002: 121).

Both Luhmann and Foucault abandon the clear distinction between the scientist as the subject and social reality as the object of science (cf. Haynes 2002: 146). If science is a social system in itself, then any observation of the social is based on the codes of the scientific system, and this is necessarily a construction. If reality has no legible face for Foucault, Luhmann recurs to cognitive biologists such as Humberto Maturana to provide a basis for that claim. Like any other social system, science, too, needs to reduce complexity, and is therefore not

dealing with an independent object of reality, but with a particular construction of that reality.

### ***Against a single normative basis***

Since there is no one single representation of the world, there cannot be a single norm with the status of an undeniable truth. Accordingly, both Foucault's and Luhmann's voices are raised against a single normative foundation of society. As noted earlier, in a Foucauldian perspective such a foundation always works through the imposition of a specific meaning of "normality" (cf. Foucault 1965). In a world systems theoretical perspective, the development of ethics itself is part of a functional differentiation that is characterized by a paradox: on the one hand, norms and ethics become universal and set apart from concrete life situations; on the other hand, given the "polycontextuality" in which the system of ethics operates, the expectations of a universal "good" will automatically be disappointed (cf. Luhmann 1997a: 1045). Thus, both Foucault and Luhmann provide counterarguments to the call for "grand social designs" (Albert 1999: 241).

At the same time, however, both argue that a critical academia is possible and called for, and in both cases the critical theorist would, instead of proposing an alternative scheme to reality, deconstruct the dominant representations of the world. Foucault's proposal is a "critique of what we are" as both a "historical analysis of the limits that are imposed upon us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them" (Foucault 1984: 50). Luhmann, quite similarly, suggests that we perform "the problematization of distinctions" and the historical contextualizations of the forms they take (Luhmann 1997a: 1149), as well as that we contribute observations that others are unable to perform (Luhmann 1990a: 91) because of their different systemic embeddedness.

In both cases, then, an analysis of international relations would have to analyze, for instance, the production of sovereign territorial units in and against an anarchical space, with the underlying distinctions of sovereign/non-sovereign and inside/outside, although the latter seems to evolve towards a metadifference rather than one specific to the international (see Albert 1999: 257).

### ***Productive rules***

The final commonality relates to the way knowledge is produced. We have already seen that in Luhmann this takes place through the practice of observation and distinction. Each system through communication develops and then reproduces a certain basic code such as legal/illegal. This is necessary for the system to "know" and reproduce itself (cf. Luhmann 1997a: 223, 748). Such a code transforms "analogous" situations into "digital" ones in order to be processable within the system (cf. Luhmann 1997a: 360). But in so doing, its function is twofold. On the one hand, it produces reality as observation, on the other hand it may be understood as the rule enabling and governing these observations. A

code is thus a productive rule: it tells the system (while being reproduced by the system) how to observe reality, and brings reality into being at the same time.

A structuralist reading of Foucault comes to similar conclusions. Discourses, in such a reading, are held together by rules that determine what makes sense within the discourse at hand (cf. Frank 1983: 139). This is predominantly derived from Foucault's archaeology of knowledge, in which he is interested to uncover the "play of rules" that allow the "appearance of objects" – such as, one may add, the state (cf. Foucault 1981: 50). The rules that allow the state to come into being within the discourse of International Relations are those of subjectivity and sovereignty, both of which can only work on the basis of the dichotomizations subject/non-subject (object) and sovereign/non-sovereign (anarchical). In other words, what is at work here, too, is a set of rules that allow us to talk about reality in particular modes, and thereby bring this world into being by producing meaning for us, and reducing the complexity of reality (cf. Medd 2002).

Let me give an example. As Ole Wæver and his colleagues in Copenhagen have argued, the meaning of "Europe," or more specifically of European governance is dependent on discourses that are by and large organized along national spaces and bring together "state" and "nation" in particular ways (cf. Wæver 1998, 2002, 2004; Holm 1997; Larsen 1997, 1999). All conceptualizations of European governance have to refer to this particular bundling of nation/state, which in turn may be seen as the general rule of the discourse on political organization – or, if you will, a basic code of the political system. Note, however, that this conceptualization depends on a decidedly structuralist understanding of discourse. It is this structuralist understanding that is problematic from the critical perspective underlying this chapter (see also Diez 2001), which is only amplified by performing the move from Foucault to Luhmann.

### **Modern Systems Theory and the limits of political criticism**

One of the initial problems with Modern Systems Theory is its complex and expansive dictionary. This to me is not a problem in itself. Any perspective that offers alternative accounts of reality runs into the challenge of how to observe without falling into the traps of our existing language, which already embeds particular constructions of reality. Rather, the problem is that the language of Modern Systems Theory is in itself a closed system. Once you have accepted its language, the theory makes absolute sense within its confines, and it makes sense of a broad range of social phenomena – it is, after all, designed as a global (in the sense of all-encompassing) theory of society. Yet my concern is about the exact terms on which Modern Systems Theory is built. In particular, I would like to contest its inherent, and self-imposed, limitations. My critique is therefore necessarily a critique from the outside, and therefore the terminology used in the following is not always consistent with the terminology of systems theory.

As a starting point, it is useful to consider that the scientific system, for Luhmann (1990a), operates on the basic code of true/untrue (*wahr/unwahr*).

Ironically, Luhmann's own work bears a rather ambiguous relationship to the scientific system thus defined. On the one hand, Modern Systems Theory regards the possibility of truth as a fiction, and therefore observes the operation of the code, but does not accept it within the theory itself. On the other hand, the reflexivity of Modern System Theory is limited, as it must at the same time claim that its own observations about society are true. It shares this problem with discursive approaches, yet many of those writing from a Foucauldian perspective would see their interventions as political. This does not get around the truth question, but it provides a purpose that does not in itself rely on truth claims.

At a closer look, only a positivist, narrowly defined science is about truth claims in the form of true/untrue. There are at least three different, broad purposes of science (see further on this, Diez and Wiener 2004). First, science tries to explain or understand events. While explaining and understanding make different epistemological claims, they are also different enough from other purposes to be lumped together here. Second, science tries to describe social phenomena. The European Union is a case in point: as indicated above, there are plenty of works about the "nature" of the EU. Third, science tries to critique and provide normative guidance. Again, criticism and normative guidance are different in many respects, but they share a commitment to move beyond the existing order. All three purposes can, but do not have to be combined with positivism, and can relax the true/untrue code depending on their epistemological stance.

Modern Systems Theory, in its attempt to provide second- or higher-order observations, pursues primarily the purpose of description (of how society works), while at the same time relaxing the truth claims about its description. Most discourse analyses taking their inspiration from Foucault, however, pursue the purpose of criticism (of dominant conceptualizations of society), while at the same time relaxing the truth claims about their critique. This is ultimately why Modern Systems Theory provides a *potential* critical starting point in questioning the violence of the basic code, but the criticism cannot come from within the theory itself – therefore Luhmann's insistence on the role of a scientist rather than an activist in the observation of new social movements. For the Foucauldian discourse analyst, however, theory is critique – hence Walker's endorsement of new social movements.

This discussion highlights two problems in Modern Systems Theory from a poststructuralist perspective. First, while poststructuralists agree with Luhmann that the "author is dead" (Foucault 1974: 21), they nonetheless focus on the practices that reproduce discourse. There are, therefore, "agents," albeit not in the form of sovereign subjects. Second, these practices are political. All critical theorists broaden the scope of the political to include everyday practices that reproduce dominant discourses. Theory thus is as much "science" as it is "politics" – the two cannot be separated. Such a separation, however, is at the heart of Luhmann. The political system in Modern Systems Theory is organized around the government/opposition code and is therefore, in the same way as science, conceptualized fairly traditionally, whereas a critical theorist usually argues that the political is much more pervasive.

Modern Systems Theory therefore imposes limits on political criticism in a way that critical theorists do not. It may well be that Luhmann would have found such criticism naïve and utopian (see Reese-Schäfer 1992: 28), but this rather reinforces the point being made here about the divergence of Modern Systems Theory and poststructuralism on this issue. Two other characteristics of Modern Systems Theory, its functionalism and its structuralism, further illustrate this argument.

### ***The problem of functionalism***

The (sub)systems of (world) society are, as we have seen, organized around societal functions. There is an economic or an academic system, for instance. These are, it is suggested, autopoietic, but are always constituted within an environment of other systems, to which they are connected through processes of structural coupling, the translation of externalities into the structural programmatic of the system. But there is no “whole” beyond systems other than world society. Human beings cease to exist other than as environment to systems. It is true that this is not necessarily anti-humanist in the sense of being cynical towards humans (cf. Luhmann 1984a: 288f). Nonetheless, there are problems of responsibility as well as creativity.

For Luhmann as for Foucault, the subject is a modern construction (cf. Luhmann 1997a: 520; for Foucault, see Dreyfus and Rabinow 1994: 173–215). With Laclau and Mouffe (1985), we may see the subject instead as defined by a discursive location which provides “subject positions,” while at the same time, from such a discursive position, drawing discourses together in the attempt to fix meaning. It is one thing that this aim is ultimately an impossible task because discourse has a life beyond the individual subject, and so meaning is always contested in a plurality of discursive subject positions. Yet, it is sometimes possible to fix meaning temporarily, not least because of discursive characteristics such as translatability (cf. Diez 1999c: 84–85). Beyond these discursive characteristics, the fixation of meaning is ultimately also dependent on the creative engagement of subjects.

Creativity in this sense does not originate in the subject itself, but neither can it do without it. Discourses provide the necessary ground for this creativity in that they enable practice through subject positions. How exactly, though, articulations emerge from such positions is unpredictable – there is no self-fulfillment, and we can only analyze in retrospect how discourses have been drawn together and drawn upon. Thus, the “postmodern” de-centered subject, although no longer “sovereign,” is not free from responsibility. In fact, while Luhmann’s theory seems to imply that systems work without the individual, and therefore seems to restrict human responsibility (although not the responsibility of the system), a Foucauldian approach extends responsibility from those traditionally seen as decision-makers to those who help reproducing the discourse within which these decision-makers operate.

Luhmann, meanwhile, sees a “responsibility for the exclusion of possibilities” (Luhmann 1997a: 837). Where this responsibility lies is not answered, but since



rules of action are provided only within functional systems (Luhmann 1997a: 778), its location can only be the system. Consequentially, to call for an ethics of responsibility, for Luhmann, is an act of desperation (Luhmann 1997a: 133, 777). From a Foucauldian perspective, Luhmann is right to point out that there is no uncontested, transcendent foundation for normative judgements (Luhmann 1997a: 777). But while for Luhmann this leads to the location of such judgements within a particular functional system (ethics), for Foucauldians they are utterly political, and the scope of political criticism in Modern Systems Theory is therefore too narrowly defined.

The problem of how radical the functionalism of systems theory should be, it must be added, is not new. Sociologist Peter Hejl (1987), for instance, argued against the notion of autopoiesis because systems, in his view, have to refer to each other and be interconnected. Accordingly, he sees them as syn- rather than self-referential. Individuals are the nodes in which they connect and in which connections are (re)established. They are thus reintegrated as essential elements of the theory, although it remains problematic to what extent they can influence the structures of the systems.

### ***The problem of structuralism***

As this discussion of the issues of responsibility and creativity in relation to functionalism has indicated, Luhmann's theory has a structuralist bias. According to Luhmann, communication reproduces systems, but is regulated by codes. The point is not that a system is stable in the sense of being rigid (cf. Luhmann 1997a: 199). But transformation, or "evolution" in Luhmannian terminology, is structured by the translatability of codes (or the operations governed by codes) (cf. Luhmann 1997a: 430). It is thus the structural quality of the system itself that decides about the future of the structure, even though, given the relation of structural coupling and reality, the system is not in full control of its development – it cannot foresee future impulses from outside. Tellingly, however, Luhmann (1997a: 431) argues that specific structures may become "obsolete when other channels of operative connections are preferred." Note the passive grammar in this sentence!

Two important aspects of this issue are hardly contestable. First, it seems widely accepted that no-one makes decisions in a situation of *tabula rasa*, and so even an individualized and rational theory of action needs to take such contexts into account (see de Jasay 1997). The conceptualization of the subject as acting from a discursively generated subject position addresses this very issue. Luhmann is therefore right to argue that systemic structures delimit the possibilities of change. Second, it also seems clear that much of the discourse analysis in International Relations has focused on discursive rules and structures, as noted above, exactly for the purpose of showing how, for instance, an EU member's European policy options are enabled and restricted by underlying narratives of state/nation complexes that cannot be simply changed from one day to the other (cf. Wæver 1998). Leaving aside the issue that discourses here are organized

within national boundaries rather than transnationally, this structuralist bias is not an argument for adopting a structuralist perspective, but a problem for discourse analysis, too (cf. Diez 2001). What remains under-theorized is how discourses are reproduced (cf. Milliken 1999). For Foucault, however, this was important in that he was interested not only in the rules of discourse, but also in how specific narratives and representations are constructed, through very concrete practices in very concrete locations.

Once again it is the political that is at stake. Ultimately, many critical discourse analyses still have a strong emancipatory ideal in that they recognize that there cannot be one single golden way into the future, and that they also recognize that whoever speaks in favor of something does so from a specific subject position, but nonetheless they assume the possibility to transform or change discourses through political practice, of which the problematization of a reality taken for granted is a first and crucial step (see, for example, Ashley and Walker 1990).

I accept that there may be, and often is, a tension between the denial of any foundational truth and the critical-emancipatory purpose, and I am skeptical of some writings taking the position of the self-styled critical scholar on the margins. It is true that reading Luhmann helps to bring this into perspective in terms of not overrating one's own impact on the overall debate, for instance. Of course a single individual's action cannot change the global economic system. The change and reworking of such systems is the work of many – but it is also the practice of subjects, and therefore a political practice.

## **Observing Modern Systems Theory**

Modern Systems Theory can itself only be seen as a second order observation, that is as an observation of observations. It thus cannot claim to represent the truth. This is not unimportant, because the main criterion to assess systems theory can thus not be whether it describes and explains reality better than other theories. Instead, any evaluation should be based on the criteria consistent with systems theory's radical constructivism, amongst them first and foremost whether the theory is of any use to operate "adequately" within a specific context (cf. Schmidt 1987: 31; Glaserfeld 1985: 9). What exactly this adequacy consists of, however, is contested. It may be to function smoothly within the system, or it may be to help transforming the current discourse.

As so many other approaches in the current debate in IR Theory, Foucauldian analyses began to spread as a reaction to the dominance of neorealism and the subsequent neo-neo merger (cf. Wæver 1997). Part of their argument was that neorealism does not present the international reality, but a specific view of the international. A view, furthermore, that serves to reify power relations and the logocentric practices of inside/outside, inclusion and exclusion (cf. Ashley 1988; 1989a; Walker 1993). Luhmann's world can likewise be seen as being entangled with a discourse of increasing functionalization, for which it may serve as a social theoretic foundation which, given its own epistemological

standards, it cannot be. The usefulness of such a theory, however, would be to help smooth operations within the system, both through showing how it works, and through arguing that the system cannot be changed through individual action anyway. Again, this takes responsibility away from the individual and attributes it to the system.

This problem, too, is not new to International Relations. It has been discussed, for instance, in relation to one of the prominent approaches to Foreign Policy Analysis in the late 1960s and 1970s, Graham Allison's bureaucratic approach, in which operational routines within the bureaucracy play a crucial role both for foreign policy decision-making itself, and for the implementation of foreign policy decisions (cf. Allison 1971). Apart from Allison's Cuban Missile Crisis case, the reason why his "organizational process model" became so successful is probably to be found somewhere between the intuitive match with our own experiences with bureaucracies, and a shared criticism of the individualist rational actor model. But the critics quite rightly claimed that if taken too far, the organizational process model would also lead to a heavy bias in that it would allow politicians to disclaim all responsibility for decisions by representing themselves as just one cog in the foreign policy machinery (for a summary, see Smith 1987).

Allison's model is not phrased in systems theory jargon, but it has many affinities with the theory. With Luhmann, we may speak of a foreign policy system, with the distinction domestic policy/foreign policy being one of the basic codes. In any case, the criticism made seems to apply to both approaches, and probably even more so to systems theory because of its even stronger focus on structural qualities. If we were to assess Luhmann's theory then according to the criteria set out above, we would be rather critical toward his observations from the observational position of this chapter.

In short, my suggestion is that a Foucauldian approach is not only able to illuminate the issues for which IR theorists of a critical persuasion may want to consult Luhmann, but that it is in fact better suited to doing so, since it does not come with a whole package of rather problematic assumptions. The studies emerging on foreign policy discourse from Campbell to Wæver, for instance, perform the task of problematizing the codes and concepts on which international politics is built, without giving up the critical agenda of changing the system. As shown above, they are not without their own problems, but these get bigger rather than smaller when bringing Modern Systems Theory into the picture.

It seems to me, then, that the introduction of Luhmann into International Relations took place in a very un-Luhmannian way. Instead of *observing* systems theory as another observation that operates according to its own codes and distinctions, systems theory was *applied* to international politics. This is how Albert's question of why there is this resistance to territorial differentiation in international politics could arise (cf. Albert 1999: 260) – a test on "reality," rather than an observation of how systems theory observes this resistance. Such an application, ultimately, is driven by the desire for a universal theory of international politics as

much as Luhmann assumes the necessity for such a theory of society in his introductory chapter to *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (1997a). This desire shows itself in Albert's reasoning why Modern Systems Theory should be taken up in IR: because it "offers a theoretical architecture that allows single theorisings in IR to relate themselves to a comprehensive theory of society" (Albert 1999: 242). From my point of view, this reminds me of what Roxanne Doty wrote about Alexander Wendt's Social Theory: such an enterprise seems to be characterized by a double desire, to take a critical stance, and nonetheless maintain stability and order (cf. Doty 2000: 137).

Reading systems theory as an observation that ultimately is a political practice does not make it uninteresting. It is a powerful theory that constructs a particular image of international relations, and it therefore has its place in the discipline's canon, not least because of its translatability into current discourses of globalization and increasing functionalization. Yet as such, Modern Systems Theory is just another discourse of international politics and warrants critical scrutiny. In particular, the critical purpose of academic discourse is not something that should easily be abandoned.

## **Note**

- 1 Oliver Kessler provided very helpful comments for the revision of an earlier version of this chapter. Particular thanks go to Stefan Rossbach, who substantially influenced my reading of Luhmann. As always, despite these influences, I bear full responsibility for the final text.

## 4 “Corpus mysticum”

### Niklas Luhmann’s evocation of world society

*Stefan Rossbach*

In a paper published in 1984 Niklas Luhmann observed that world society was “too large and too complex to be immediately understandable. Its unity [was] not accessible, neither by experience nor by action.” Hence, the “theory of society now [was] set free from interactional controls.” As a result, he concluded with a sense of relief, “sociology [became] possible” (Luhmann 1984b: 59). This observation is typical of Luhmann’s treatment of “world society.” Precisely because society’s unity was elusive, the theorist was now free to begin his conceptual work without being disturbed by “interactional controls,” i.e. by people who disagree. I will argue in this chapter that the pursuit of Luhmann’s life-long ambition – the formulation of a theory of society – was a speculative enterprise. Luhmann’s systems theory unfolded from a “vision,” which stood at the very center of his work from its beginnings. Over a period of forty years, his theoretical work attempted to articulate this “vision” and to explore its meaning and its implications.

Regardless of whether one wants to adopt Luhmann’s analysis of world society in full or merely take on board some of his concepts, it is essential to know where this analysis and its concepts come from. Situating Luhmann is important not only because it will help us to properly understand the meaning of his concepts but also because it will help us understand why his theory appeals to *us today*. Accordingly, the present chapter is divided into three parts. Drawing on Luhmann’s self-understanding as articulated in his publications as well as in interviews, the first part presents the “vision” underlying Luhmann’s quest. I will argue that Luhmann is representative of a tradition of thought known as “contemplative gnosis.” The second part shows how Luhmann’s understanding of world society as the “totality of communication” is a mere corollary of this “vision.” Luhmann’s discussion of “society” is particularly revealing in that it shows that his “vision,” normally the driving force of his questioning, could also cloud his judgement. I will argue that there is a fundamental flaw in Luhmann’s understanding of society because he failed to explain how the “totality of communication” could possibly constitute a “system.” The final, concluding part of the chapter places Luhmann’s “vision” in a historical context and examines its contemporary appeal.

### **“Die bodenlose Welt”: Luhmann’s groundless world**

Luhmann’s starting point was a critique of the “functional method” as practiced by Talcott Parsons. In his very first publication (Luhmann 1958), Luhmann observed how functionalism, when misunderstood as a method providing causal explanations, would always lead into the well-known circularity where everything happening within a given system was causally reduced to the necessity of preserving the system (cf. Luhmann 1958). The circularity was to be avoided, Luhmann argued, by re-interpreting the functional method as a method of “searching for alternatives.” For Luhmann, the reference to a “function” never prescribed in what specific way it was to be fulfilled. Instead, a “function” defined a (limited) range of possible causes that might all bring about the desired effect. Functional analysis, thus, could not be a search for causal laws understood as a relation between one cause and one effect; functional analysis had to be conceived as a search for functionally equivalent causes with regard to one problematic effect (cf. Luhmann 1958: 98–100). In other words, functional analysis was a search for possibilities of replacement and substitution (cf. Luhmann 1974a: 13–14).

According to Luhmann, this slight shift of perspective, if taken seriously, entailed a departure from “ontological metaphysics.” “Ontological metaphysics” operated on the basis of a distinction between “true being” and “non-being” and thereby excluded phenomena of becoming, vanishing, and movement from “reality.” Accordingly, ontological metaphysics had no room for contingency, i.e. for the realm of the possible. This way of thinking approached the world in an abstract manner, looking for constant features rather than principles of variation. In contrast, Luhmann’s redefined functional method cannot define “identity” as an exclusion of other possibilities; rather, identity becomes an organization or order of other possibilities. In other words, identity is not a self-sufficient substance but a co-ordinating synthesis, a *system* which always contains references to other possibilities and therefore remains fragile, problematic (cf. Luhmann 1974a: 15, 26). The essence of things cannot be defined by, or reduced to, some given kernel of substance; things are defined by the positions they occupy in a texture of other possibilities, i.e. by the conditions of their replacement (cf. Luhmann 1973b: 8).

Contemplating the history of Western philosophy, Luhmann noted that 2,000 years of searching for “essence” had led to a universal problematization of identity, unity, stability or of being in general. From now on, identity had to be understood as a *system*, i.e. as a structured openness for other possibilities (cf. Luhmann 1974b: 44–45). It is important to appreciate that Luhmann’s understanding of “system” drew on a cluster of concepts that included, as noted above, “being,” “identity” and “problem.” A system was not, therefore, a pre-conditional or unconditional entity; it did not stand for a first or ultimate cause but instead represented a problematic invariance which required stabilization. And this stabilization, as a process, always occurred in an unstable environment and could proceed along various possible paths (cf. Luhmann 1976: 395–397).

By implication, a universal systems theory based on these assumptions turns everything that appears self-evident into problems and all “essences” into functions. Understood as a methodological prescription, such a theory demands that one finds for every “thing” that *is*, i.e. for every identity, a reference point from which it can be questioned with regard to its *replaceability*. For Luhmann, this change of perspective entailed an advance in rationality because it was not based on the conviction that being (*das Seiende*), in some of its qualities, would remain what it was. The new perspective, in contrast, found reassurance in the conviction that being, under certain circumstances, did not have to remain itself. Luhmann noted that this perspective would bring a specific kind of freedom, a *libertas indifferentiae*, attainable through cognizance (*Erkenntnis*), as it would prevent us from holding on to “essences” where there were none. “Indifference,” therefore, was the key feature of this newly found “freedom” (cf. Luhmann 1974b: 47).

Thus, Luhmann positioned himself at the very end of an unsuccessful 2,000-year search for “essence.” From now on, contingency had to be understood as the very center of being. But if Luhmann’s systems could not take anything for granted, because everything was contingent, then the things or unities or elements that they did take for granted in their everyday operations had to be *self-created*. Thus, Luhmann was able to adopt the notion of “autopoiesis” so easily because it perfectly expressed one of the main implications of what he took to be a new understanding of “being.” For autopoietic systems are exactly this: systems that generate not only their own structures but also their elements.

Luhmann mentioned “autopoiesis” for the first time in the article “Autopoiesis, Handlung und kommunikative Verständigung” (Luhmann 1982f). This early exposition of the concept was as yet unsupported by secondary concepts developed later and thus gave a particularly concise and clear presentation of the vision underlying Luhmann’s appropriation of “autopoiesis,” a concept invented by the Chilean biologists Humberto Maturana and Francesco Varela. According to Luhmann, modern science had the capacity to dissolve all inviolate levels and thus proved that the world itself was groundless (*bodenlos*). Whatever a system used as “elementary,” as inviolate level, as undecomposable, was exactly this only because the system decided to resist the process of dissolution, which seemed implicit in the world’s groundlessness. The “production” of these elements was thus a form of resistance, a (local and temporary) “negation” of entropy, a warding off against the fall into the abyss of a groundless world. The ground upon which a system found itself had to be self-produced because the world within which all this took place was groundless. In this sense, the production of elements manifested a negation – a negation that would give the elements their positivity. Accordingly, there was always the possibility of problematizing the elements from outside the system because the elements were elements only for the very system that they constituted.

The systems emerge from, or differentiate themselves from, a groundless world without essences, a uniform, undifferentiated, dark nothingness – an abyss or, as the seventeenth century mystic Jakob Boehme would call it, an *Ungrund* (cf.

Weeks 1991; O’Regan 2002). The differentiation of the system corresponds to the introduction of a distinction into the underlying uniformity. For Luhmann, everything started with a distinction. Systems came into existence once the world, the “unmarked space,” was “wounded” (*verletzt* – sometimes Luhmann speaks of an *Einkerbung*, a “notching”) by a distinction.

It is instructive to look at the similarities between Luhmann’s theory design and the teaching of his favorite mystic, Nicholas of Cusa. On a number of occasions, Luhmann refers to Cusa sympathetically, turning the fifteenth century thinker almost into a predecessor of Modern Systems Theory (cf. Luhmann 1991b: 939, 945; Luhmann 1992a: 107–111; Luhmann 1997a: 58n). In fact, the affinity between their concerns is too striking to be accidental. According to Luhmann, one of the main goals of systems theory is to reflect on the necessity of latency, on the inevitability of “blind spots” in all observations (cf. Luhmann 1974c: 68). Systems theory is an attempt to incorporate the “blind spot” in sociological theory, to make it visible (cf. Luhmann 1987c: 30). This is a paradoxical enterprise and leads to the well-known paradoxes in Luhmann’s formulations: “Reality is what we do not perceive (*erkennen*) when we perceive reality” (Luhmann 1990g: 51). Luhmann understands “second order cybernetics” as a contemplation of the visibility and invisibility of “blind spots.” The sociologist together with the proponents of second order cybernetics see “that society cannot see that it cannot see what it cannot see” (Luhmann 1992b: 134).

Similarly, throughout the last 1,500 years the concern of mystics was to introduce transcendence into immanence, to make paradoxes visible (cf. Fuchs 1992: 73). Cusa was no exception. In his *Visio Dei* (1453), Cusa explained that it was only through a kind of “notseeing” that God could be seen. God was the absolute ground, where all otherness merged into one, and where difference was identity. God was invisibly visible. He was the *finis sine fine*, the end without end, the *finis infinitus*, the infinite end. Simultaneous, contradictory judgements about God’s connection with created things were valid (cf. Miller 1984). The title of Cusa’s work, *The Vision of God*, entails the same ambiguity as Heinz von Foerster’s *Observing Systems* and Luhmann’s *Beobachtungen der Moderne*, merging subject and object of “observation.”

For Luhmann, the system’s “blind spot” was the distinction between system and environment, which remained unobservable for the system as long as it was employed in its operation. In other words, the system’s reality was a distinction which, for the system, was cognitively inaccessible and hence “invisible.” As in Cusa’s design, the paradoxes of second order observation were “obstructing walls,” preventing a return to the original perfect uniformity and oneness of the unmarked space (cf. Luhmann 1993c: 487). Cusa called this oneness “God.” Luhmann, in contrast, found it more difficult to give a name to this unity and uniformity. If he referred to it at all, he called it the “world.” “Everything can be conceptualized as a system – with the exception of the world, which alone has no boundaries” (Luhmann 1976: 395). The “world” was not a system because it did not have an “exterior” from which it could distinguish itself (cf. Luhmann 1974d: 115). The world could not be observed because “observation” would



introduce a distinction and hence destroy the unity of the world. Nevertheless, the world remained a unity, which systems continuously “carry along” (*eine stets mitgeführte Einheit*) as a horizon (cf. Luhmann 1992c: 384, 1997a: 57).

How did the unmarked space become a “wounded world”? Luhmann noted that the infliction of the first “wound” was the story of a “fall from grace.” It is not accidental that Luhmann repeatedly referred to Virgilio Malvezzi’s *Ritratto del Privato Politico Cristiano* (1635) as an authoritative account of this “wounding” (cf. Luhmann 1987b: 243f, 1988a: 265f, 1992b: 124f). In Malvezzi’s *Ritratto*, Luhmann found the story of Lucifer, who in his attempt to observe God, had to draw a distinction and thereby ended up on the other side of the “good,” turning him into an “evil” force. Luhmann showed great sympathy for the devil in this context because, in his symbolism, whatever “existed,” existed only on the basis of a distinction, on the basis of a destruction of the original “pre-cosmic” oneness. A perfect continuum, like Luhmann’s “world,” could not observe itself. If the “world” wanted to observe itself, it would have to differentiate out of itself a closed system, a “devil,” which could produce a distance to the original “world” and “denote” (*bezeichnen*) this “world” (Luhmann 1990a: 303). The demonization of Lucifer was thus the immediate consequence of an epistemological inevitability. There is a sense, then, in which Lucifer had to be understood as a “victim.”

Luhmann referred to Lucifer’s problematic fate also in his *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (Luhmann 1997a: 847–848). Lucifer had to draw a distinction in order to be able to observe, “from the other side,” God and His creation. The drawing of a distinction within – and against – a unity was the devil’s typical mode of observation. The text in *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* is the same, verbatim, as in a version of the *Theorie der Gesellschaft* (1989), which circulated among the disciples at the time (cf. Luhmann 1989d: 317). However, for the 1997 two-volume work Luhmann added a footnote referring to Malvezzi and, interestingly, to Hegel, who offered a “secularized version” of the same idea.

Having drawn a distinction and having thus distanced himself from God, Lucifer was able to see God’s “blind spot,” an insight that made him feel superior to God. Luhmann’s theory eclipses Lucifer’s problem precisely at this point. The gesture is still the same – second order observation – but Luhmann could see what the devil was unable to see: that even Lucifer’s *visio Dei* had its “blind spot.” Second order observation was not *better* than first order observation because *every* observation introduced “blind spots.” And precisely because his “amorality” eclipsed even Lucifer’s, Luhmann may have felt justified in showing empathy with the devil. After all, considering the reaction his work provoked in some circles, Luhmann must have been tempted to compare the treatment he received with the prejudices that turned an “innocent” Lucifer into the devil.

### **Contemplative gnosis**

Beyond or beneath the systems, the distinctions, and the paradoxes there was an “unmarked world.” The *actual* world of the systems was a “wounded” world, a

negation of the unmarked space. After the infliction of a first “wound,” being was nothing but a processing of distinctions. The original unity and uniformity of the unmarked space were effectively lost. They could not be restored through observation because an observation was a distinction and, as such, created “blind spots” even if it observed the “blind spots” of other observations. By implication, conscious systems, as observing systems, were necessarily excluded from reality in the same way as they were excluded “from paradise” (Luhmann 1988c: 294). Distanced from reality, these systems needed to build up their own “internal” complexity, their own “meaning world.” Luhmann’s systems are totalizing systems because, in his words, a system “cannot avoid operating within a world of its own” (Luhmann 1986b: 179).

Luhmann’s systems theory works on the basis of the same principle. Its code system/environment defines a world of its own. It defines the operations by which a system (the theory) differentiates itself within the world in order to observe the world (cf. Luhmann 1990a: 310). Luhmann’s theory is one communicative system among many; and like all the other systems, it processes distinctions and hence cannot lead us back to the unmarked “paradise.” And yet, the theory’s function is precisely to contemplate and “remember” the original unity, oneness and homogeneity of the unmarked space. The theory knows of the inevitability of “blind spots” but it offers a realm within which it is possible to move from one “blind spot” to the next, from first to second order observation and back. According to Luhmann, “universal theories” had precisely this function: to provide an “experiential field” for the oscillation between self-observation and the observation of the external world (cf. Luhmann 1986b: 188).

The crucial insight provided by this movement is that every observation is a self-limitation; and in order to overcome this limitation one has to continue observing, but in different ways, using different distinctions. Luhmann’s theory evokes the consciousness of a pre-Luciferan unity by providing the flexibility that is required in order to avoid a hypostatization of particular distinctions. In order to achieve this flexibility, the theory must allow for “re-entries.” In other words, the theory must be able to return to the observations and distinctions that it had taken for granted at earlier stages of its development. Thus, the theory must be able to re-problematize its own beginnings. Luhmann eclipses Lucifer’s problem because his theory is more than a theory, more than a single-shot observation or proposition; the theory *is a social system*. It does not observe and then stop. It continues to operate and to observe and it can therefore “return” to “blind spots” presupposed in earlier observations.

Within the theory there were, then, no limits to “meaningful problematization.” Everything that existed became visible in its positivity as a negation of other possibilities. The unmarked space of possibilities was remembered – if not preserved – by a semantic space in which it was possible to negate such negations (cf. Luhmann 1971b: 85). And as one moved in this semantic space, it became obvious that “all structures are based on deception – deception about the true structure of the world” (Luhmann 1974d: 120). Clearly, however, the

“true structure of the world” could not be “restored” or “described” by another axiomatic theory; the description must come in the form of a system, a space, where deceptions could be continuously revealed as deceptions, and negations could be continuously negated. The infinite unity of the world, of the unmarked space, reappeared in the theory in the absence of limits of problematization. And precisely because the world did not offer resting places that could serve as starting points for meaningful existence – precisely, that is, because the world was groundless – systems *had to* produce their own elements and create their own meaning.

I am not the first to characterize Luhmann’s theory as a variant of mysticism (cf. Reese-Schäfer 1992: 159–160). In fact, Luhmann himself compared his work to “Eastern techniques of meditation” because, as he acknowledged, they too aimed at an “omission of all distinctions” (Luhmann 1989c: 339). He accepted that his design could still be called “metaphysics” but claimed that it was not “ontological metaphysics” (Luhmann 1992c: 384). In this context, it is also worth mentioning that the affinity between the Maturana’s “autopoiesis” and “Buddhist logic” was noted prior to Luhmann’s adaptation of the concept (cf. Ghose 1980: 204–206).

The meditative practice that Luhmann’s theory expresses has a long history and is part of a longstanding tradition. The literary form of the “system,” for example, was identified by Hans Jonas as one of the characteristic features of the “Gnostic” systems of late Antiquity. Jonas characterized the second and third centuries as a “hothouse for systems” (Jonas 1966: 173). The literature on Gnosticism is extensive – and controversial – and all I can do here is to draw attention to some of the affinities between Luhmann and the “Gnostic” systems. In the relevant literature, “Gnosticism” usually refers to an “anti-cosmic dualism” between the cosmos and a pre-cosmic world. The creation of the cosmos was due to an error, a mistake that was not meant to happen. The pre-cosmic world of light was a perfect, homogenous unity and oneness that did not “contain” distinctions. Cosmic history begins with a tragic, “first” distinction, a fall from unity and oneness, which, in a chain of events, ends with the coming-into-being of the cosmos. Human existence is cosmic existence but humans carry within themselves a divine spark, a spark of the divine light from the pre-cosmic world, and it is this spark that links them to the divine, pre-cosmic oneness. Indeed, humans become the conspirators in the divine plan to overcome the cosmos and to restore the original perfect unity.

Living in the cosmos, however, the humans are seduced by its powers. They “forget” that their existence in the cosmos is an “alienated existence.” With their divine spark, they do not belong to the cosmos; they are, in a sense, “beyond” the cosmos. But forgetting, ignorance and lack of knowledge are what chains them to the powers and laws of cosmic existence. They have been seduced to accept the inviolate levels of the world as they find them. They do not understand that they – as members of the world of light – are beyond the manifold distinctions prevailing in the cosmos. Accordingly, it is knowledge – *gnosis* – that liberates them. The secret saving knowledge of their true origins awakens humans from

their state of ignorance, reveals the cosmic inviolate levels as arbitrary, and reminds humans that they have to overcome the cosmos and return to the pre-cosmic oneness. The saving knowledge consists, therefore, of a narrative which explains to the listener “who we were and what we have become, where we were and into what we have been thrown, whither we hasten and from what we are redeemed, what is birth and what is rebirth” (from Theodotus, a disciple of Valentinus, quoted in Jonas 1964: 108; cf. there also for an interpretation).

Gnostic myth tells the story of the negation of a negation. The cosmos was a negation; its overcoming will be a second negation. The cosmos is the result of a “wounding” of an original oneness. Once the arbitrariness of this and subsequent distinctions is revealed, the Gnostic understands that the structures of the cosmos are based on deception and ignorance; he can no longer accept its inviolate levels as structures *sui generis*. Still, the myth will then have to explain how these inviolate levels, in spite of their arbitrariness, have somehow come into being. Because it does not accept anything as given, the myth must explain everything. It is therefore presented in the literary form of a system – a “universal” system with an answer to everything. This system has to be self-referential because it includes the moment of salvation. It tells the story of how an unwanted and unintended accident created the cosmos, how the humans became conspirators in a divine plan to overcome the cosmos, how they were seduced and entered a state of sleep-like ignorance, how they were awakened by the myth, and how they were thereby inspired to return “home.” The myth occurs in its own contents; it not only tells the story of a turning point but it implements it. The myth is both recital and effectuation of salvation – a paradigmatic case of “re-entry.”

“Gnostic” myth could be “implemented” in a variety of ways. Some groups believed that the return to the divine oneness could take place only after death. Accordingly, secret verses were whispered to the dying, which the latter were asked to recite on their ascent after death so that they could finally bypass the cosmic powers. Other groups believed that asceticism was the appropriate way of leaving the cosmos while one was still inhabiting it. Still others believed it was possible to approach oneness through meditation and contemplation. There are contacts, therefore, also to Neo-Platonic systems, in which the various gradations of being result from “emanation” proceeding from the One.

The similarities to Luhmann’s theory design are obvious. The Gnostic dualism problematizes the cosmos in its entirety, and Luhmann’s vision is no less radical than this. Luhmann was tired of 2,000 years of searching for essence, and he drew, for us, the final conclusion: there is none. Hence, everything that is considered “normal,” everything that is taken for granted, has to be considered “unlikely.” The “normal,” “self-evident” grounds of everyday existence have to be dissolved and their unlikelihood and contingency exposed, so that it then needs to be explained how what has been revealed as contingent could ever have ossified into a “normality,” into an inviolate level (cf. Luhmann 1981c: 11). For the one who observes reality through such lenses, it is impossible to become attached to whatever poses as “normality.” In his retirement lecture at Bielefeld

University, Luhmann asked himself whether there was anything “behind” or “beneath” his theory? The last two words of the lecture provided the answer: “*Gar nichts!*” – “Nothing!” – and the exclamation mark, which is in the original, is important (cf. Luhmann 1993b: 259). There is a sense in which he is right in proclaiming that there is “nothing” behind his theory, but Luhmann’s mystic vision implicitly hypostatizes this “nothing” as a positive entity, as the “world,” the “unmarked space,” as a “Nothing!”

Luhmann’s rebellion against the inviolate levels of the cosmos – against the “deception” that hides the “true structure of the world” – does not call for action or change because action requires a purpose, a goal. But if paradise is lost, it is not clear what this goal should be. In the moment of action, the goal becomes another inviolate level – another deception. Accordingly, Luhmann proclaimed: “No 11th thesis any more!” – and again, the exclamation mark is telling (cf. Luhmann 1993b: 249). And, as noted earlier, it is precisely here, in the absence of Marx’s “11th thesis” – “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it” (Marx 1974) – that Luhmann sees “an advance in rationality.” The “11th thesis” is replaced by a contemplative *gnosis*, which provides us with the *libertas indifferentiae*, the freedom of indifference.

## **World society**

Of course, world society is not the same as the “world.” In contrast to the world, world society has boundaries because it is, by definition, the totality of communication and hence does not include, for example, consciousness (cf. Luhmann 1984a: 555). And yet, Luhmann’s treatment of world society parallels his treatment of the “world.” In his discussion of “society” and “world society” one can find the same intellectual gesture that, in his self-understanding, marked his departure from “ontological metaphysics”: his re-interpretation of the functional method. Luhmann contemplated the unity of the world in the functional equivalence of all distinctions; all distinctions are woundings of the world. Similarly, all social systems including societies have to differentiate themselves from, and within, world society (cf. Luhmann 1997a: 163). Accordingly, all communication “implies world society” (Luhmann 1997a: 150). In communication, world society is “carried along” in a manner analogous to the way in which, for autopoietic systems, the world is “carried along” as a horizon. In other words, one obtains “world society” by taking the cross-section of the “world” that consists of communication only. In Luhmann’s construction, world society is a derivate of the world, and as such it shares the “mystical” features of the latter. In the first instance, his world society is a horizon and hence not a concrete phenomenon that could become the object or subject of political organization.

It is important to appreciate that this understanding of world society is not particularly original. In the history of mysticism it appears almost as a constant across a wide range of different mystical traditions. For example, Meister Eckhart’s intuition of unity, when applied to humanity, gives rise to a world society not unlike Luhmann’s. As Ernst Otto explained, “in space and time I

behold this man beside that man. Without space and time this is that and that is this. In the mystical vision stands man, the one, the whole, all mankind undivided and joined together in him” (Otto 1987: 67). Unfortunately, it is precisely when he tries to go beyond this understanding of world society as a horizon that Luhmann’s analysis runs into serious problems. For the horizon, for Luhmann, must also be a “system.”

From early on Luhmann felt that sociology, in order to acquire an identity as a “proper” academic discipline, required a general theory of society as the all-encompassing social entity. Once he had embraced the notion of the “system,” it became clear that this general theory would have to present society as a “system” (cf. Luhmann 1971a: 15–24). From then on, Luhmann’s efforts were largely driven by the need to find a definition of “system” that would do the job. And he adopted the idea of “autopoiesis” precisely because he believed that it could fill this gap in his work. This move, however, posed problems of its own. Luhmann’s definition of society as the totality of communication, as noted above, assigned to society the role of a horizon. But it did not draw on the notion of “autopoiesis” at all. Thus, Luhmann needed to provide an additional argument that would show that this society, the totality of communication, was indeed a system, i.e. an autopoietic system.

What is Luhmann’s argument? In *Soziale Systeme*, Luhmann (1994a) explained that society was the autopoietic system *par excellence* because society produced communication and communication constituted society. Society constituted the elements it consisted of (communication) and whatever was constituted in this way became society (cf. Luhmann 1984a: 555). The problem with this argument is that it has nothing to do with “autopoiesis.” Instead, it merely exploits the logical properties of a “totality.” One could use the same argument to show that the set of all cats and dogs forms an autopoietic system. The totality of all cats and dogs produces more cats and dogs and these cats and dogs become moments in the totality of all cats and dogs. The argument, in fact, works for all “totalities” X, but the question of whether X is an autopoietic system is a very different question. Note, for example, that the “totality of all cats and dogs” is *not* an autopoietic system. Thus, in order to substantiate the thesis that the totality of communication is a system, Luhmann would need an additional principle that guarantees connectivity beyond the common membership in one species or category (in this case: communication). There is a sense in Luhmann, of course, that communication induces more communication but to say that the totality of communication is an autopoietic system means that every communication must be “connected,” possibly via a sequence or “chain” of intermediate communications, with every other communication.

Luhmann’s vision of world society is breathtaking. It assumes that in spite of differences in language and culture, there is continuity and uniformity beneath the mumbles and stumbles produced daily all over the globe. Such a vision is particularly problematic for a theory that claims to begin theorizing with difference and with distinctions rather than with identity. Moreover, Luhmann’s

“argument” in *Soziale Systeme* is not an argument at all; it is a claim based on flawed reasoning. It is bizarre that a thinker as sharp as Luhmann remained unaware of this problem; in fact, thirteen years after *Soziale Systeme*, the late *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* simply repeats the same error of reasoning (cf. Luhmann 1997a: 90–91).

Whenever Luhmann comes close to discovering this gap in his theory, he usually leaves us with “obvious” empirical observations. At one point he reflected on the possibility that there could be more than just one society. In this case, there would be more than one totality of communication, meaning these societies would not know of any communication in their respective environments. In other words, for each of these societies, the existence of other societies would be without consequences (cf. Luhmann 1997a: 78). For the purpose of theory building, this possibility can therefore be neglected. In any case, he added, the fact of one and only one world society was simply the result of historical developments, most importantly of the full discovery of the earth as a compact sphere (cf. Luhmann 1982b, 1982c: 82, 1975: 97, 1982e, 1997a: 148). The case for world society, according to Luhmann, was hence empirically well-supported and “obvious” (cf. Luhmann 1997a: 170, 2000a: 220).

Interestingly, in the late 1960s, before Luhmann adopted the notion of “autopoiesis,” he briefly contemplated the possibility that society, as the all-encompassing social entity, could not be described as a “system.” In this case, he continued, society would simply be “a non-exclusive structure, which enables communication and interprets the world” (Luhmann 1971a: 17). In the end, Luhmann rejected this possibility because it would eject “society” from sociology’s subject matter. In other words, the idea was rejected not because it was true of false – Luhmann does not engage in an argument of this kind – but because it would be in conflict with sociology’s purpose.

Luhmann’s maneuvers are revealing. The “argument” concerning the possible coexistence of several “exclusive” societies is interesting but again merely exploits the logical properties of “totalities.” In other words, this “argument” too has nothing to do with “autopoiesis.” The fact that he “sensed” that “horizons” cannot be “systems” is hardly reassuring considering that his concern for his discipline – sociology – overrode common sense. The empirical observations, finally, are there for us to believe or reject – but they certainly are not substitutes for a theory of society.

Niklas Luhmann’s conception of world society is largely motivated by conflicting assumptions which are intrinsic to his “vision” and to the discipline to which he intended to contribute (sociology). Because the tension between these assumptions – the “horizon” versus the “system” – cannot be resolved, it is difficult to characterize Luhmann’s approach as a “theory.” The mystical element of his thinking about society appears to us to be more coherent than the sociological element. To the extent, therefore, that his world society is a derivative of his “vision,” I may characterize his discussion of world society as an “evocation,” a “calling forth” of an entity whose reality remains mysterious.

## Conclusion

At the center of Luhmann’s “vision” stands a very specific and idiosyncratic appreciation of the historical role of science as the force that reveals the truth of the groundlessness of the world. It is impossible to over-emphasize the importance that Luhmann assigns to the impact of science on society. In the past, he explained, the history of the self-reflection of European society tended to be a history of the hypostatizations of functional primacies. For example, as long as “religion” was the dominant subsystem of society, society was interpreted in “religious” terms. For Marx, in contrast, economics was the dominant subsystem and hence societal self-reflection was conducted in economic terms. The hypostatization of functional primacies came to an end, however, with the arrival of modern science. Science was “reflective”; science would be able to appreciate that it was only one functional subsystem among many and hence would not hypostatize itself. In fact, science could not impose a ground onto what it knew to be a groundless world (cf. Luhmann 1981e: 222).

The epochal significance of science leads us back from Luhmann’s late twentieth century to the seventeenth century, the time when modern science took hold in the European mind. The rise of science signified an attempt to re-establish the foundations of knowledge in a period of history in which the horrors of religious warfare provided visible evidence in support of the skeptics, who questioned the possibility of both moral knowledge and knowledge derived from sensory experience. Descartes was among those who accepted the challenge of the skeptics. Searching for “rock and clay” beneath the “loose earth and sand” of his contemporary intellectual climate, he discovered the “Cogito Ergo Sum” as the foundation which even the most radical skeptics could not undermine. Luhmann recognized Descartes as one of his predecessors. What Descartes discovered was the mind’s autopoiesis, i.e. the mind’s ability to find certainty in the facticity of its own operation. Luhmann, according to his self-understanding, offered a radicalization and generalization of the Cartesian gesture. In Luhmann’s framework, self-reference is no longer the privilege of the mind or the subject but it becomes the general principle of system differentiation (cf. Luhmann 1982c: 72). As a result, he finds his “rock and clay” in the inevitability of “blind spots,” which he considers to be “evident beyond deduction and causality” (Luhmann 1986c: 130–131). Of course, this radicalization is also partly a reversal. Where Descartes conceived of science as a response to the skeptics, Luhmann knew science as skepticism’s ultimate manifestation.

The full meaning of these analogies becomes apparent once it is understood that the real significance of “self-reference” goes beyond epistemological concerns. Again, the comparison with the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is instructive. Historically, “self-reference” becomes important in the aftermath of periods of prolonged ideological conflict. For neo-Stoic writers like Justus Lipsius, it was a commonplace that during a “peace more brutal than war” the wise man would think of his own survival first. When people killed in the name of truth, it was always better to suspend judgement and to remember the



contingency of one's own opinions so that one could not be taken at one's word. In dark times such as these, the only certitude one could rely on was the one that one created for oneself. In other words, the ground upon which you stood in a groundless world had to be your own creation. Born in 1927, Luhmann experienced both the Second World War and the Cold War, and his "theory" articulates the loss of orientation that is the lasting effect of a period of ideological conflict. Luhmann's "theory" appeals to his readers today to the extent that they share this loss of orientation.

## **Part II**

# **Competing notions of world society and world society as the “largest social system possible”**



# 5 The “English School” and world society<sup>1</sup>

*Chris Brown*

## **Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to stage a series of engagements between the English School’s notion of an “international society” and a variety of alternative conceptions of world or global society, including Luhmann’s Modern Systems Theory (MST). In this introduction the provenance of the approach will be addressed, in particular the relationship between English School thinking and “realism.” A central tenet of the modern English School (hereafter ES) is that a clear distinction between realism and the ES can be established. That position, which is shared by recent attempts to re-vitalize the ES (here termed the New ES), is contested in what follows (cf. Buzan 1999). The point of the following discussion is to situate international society theory and the ES; contrary to some of its adherents, the work of the ES cannot easily be distinguished from realism – indeed, in so far as it gives voice to the conventional wisdom about statecraft accumulated over the last three and a half centuries (a much wider European experience of international relations than the sobriquet “English” would suggest), it can claim to be closer to traditional realism than the structural variety of the latter currently dominant.

There is general agreement that the Rockefeller-funded “British Committee on the theory of international politics,” formed in the 1950s, constituted a kind of institutional core for the original ES (cf. Dunne 1998). This committee, to which Hedley Bull later acted as secretary and whose most influential member, arguably, was, Martin Wight, met, exchanged essays, and in 1966 published what is still the most impressive collection to be focused on their master-concept of “international society,” *Diplomatic Investigations* (Butterfield and Wight 1966). In the 1970s, other collections were published, as well as Bull’s major study of *The Anarchical Society*; Wight’s post-war essay, *Power Politics*, was republished posthumously in an expanded edition, along with his influential essays on *Systems of States* (cf. Donelan 1978; Bull 1995 [1977]; Wight 1977, 1978).

Although these are the founding documents of the ES, they were written *before* the term was coined, in a hostile essay by Roy Jones in 1981, and subsequently accepted by a second generation of scholars as a somewhat geographically imprecise intellectual identity (cf. Jones 1981). Jones drew a distinction between

the ES writers and classical realism, and this distinction has been adopted by such second generation authors as Nicholas Wheeler and Tim Dunne, as well as, in a different way, by the group of scholars – the New ES – associated with Barry Buzan and Richard Little who are attempting today to redefine the ES as a distinctive research program (cf. Buzan 1993, 1999; Buzan and Little 2000; Dunne 1995, 1998; Wheeler 1992, 2000). The second generation visualize the ES as distinctively ploughing a middle way between realist and utopian formulations, with its key concept of “international society” occupying a space between the “international system” of realism and the “world community” of utopianism, and while the New ES are less wedded to this middle way, they agree that the ES is not realist in any conventional sense (cf. Brown 1995a).

As will be outlined in the next section, the notion of an international society does impart a particular spin to notions such as the “balance of power,” but, arguably, this spin operates within, essentially, a classical realist frame of reference. Certainly, in the 1960s and 1970s, authors such as Raymond Aron, Bull, Carr, Inis Claude, George Kennan, Hans Morgenthau, Wight, and Arnold Wolfers were read as such without any great sense that the British-based members of this set had a position which clearly distinguished them from Aron or the “Americans.” Rather, the key contrast was between *all* of these writers on the one hand, and the advocates of the behavioral revolution in the social sciences on the other. The behavioral approach to IR was slammed by Bull in a much-anthologized paper mistitled “The Case for a Classical Approach” – actually a root-and-branch attack on “scientism,” anathematizing all model-building and attempts to quantify data (cf. Bull 1969). The classical/scientific divide was partly about methods but also about substance, some “scientists” being less state-centric than most “classical” scholars; it ran throughout the profession in the UK, where the “scientists” were generally a minority, accused by the majority of seeking abstraction for its own sake, quantifying inappropriately, and, generally, being too influenced by American behavioral science. The scientists in turn accused their accusers of resorting to anecdote rather than proper history, of a characteristically British high cultural ignorance of scientific method and basic statistics, and, generally, of reducing the study of IR to a branch of *belles lettres*.

This was a serious debate which reflected a real division of opinion in international studies, especially in Britain, but no such divide was perceived between theorists of international society and the other realists listed above. Morgenthau’s approach to the balance of power might have been marginally different from that of Bull and Wight but these differences were not seen as defining distinct approaches to international relations. Wight’s influential identification of “three traditions of international theory” delineates “realism” from both “rationalism” and “revolutionism,” but the proposition that the international society approach is particularly associated with the second of these traditions – a proposition held by later adherents to the ES such as Nicholas Wheeler – is difficult to sustain from his or Bull’s writings (cf. Wight 1991; e.g. Wheeler 1992). An “English School Realist” is not an oxymoron.

Why then has the idea that the ES, international society perspective is distinct from realism come to be widely accepted? Here a new factor must be brought into play. Kenneth Waltz, author of *Man, the State and War* (1959), and former secretary of the American equivalent of the British Committee was seen as a classical realist in the 1960s and 1970s and it was not anticipated then that the argument of this book, when reworked and repackaged in 1979 to constitute *Theory of International Politics*, would prove to be the foundation document for a major restatement of realist thinking. In this restatement, traditional realist conceptions such as the balance of power were married to the methodology of rational choice theory, itself the end-result of the behavioral revolution's impact on American political science, in order to create structural (or neo-) realism. It was not until Richard Ashley's brilliant polemic "The Poverty of Neorealism" (1984) that the extent to which Waltz's ideas would become the basis for neo-utilitarian IR theory (possibly against his will, see Waltz 1997) was understood.

In any event, the emergence of structural realism, and the way in which its problematic came to dominate US academic International Relations, raised interesting issues about the relationship between this new mode of thought and the realism of the pre-1979 era. In effect, older realists have been divided into two camps – those who can plausibly be regarded as prototypical neo-realists, and those who cannot. Who falls into which camp is, of course, disputable but, broadly speaking, it is more difficult to assimilate to neo-realism those past realists who stressed notions such as culture, identity, norms and agency – and these are themes that characterize the work of the ES. On this basis, the relatively marginal (albeit significant) actual differences between Bull's *Anarchical Society* and Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* can be elevated into major points of principle; the ES approach becomes a way (one way) of preserving the classical heritage of IR theory from the ravages of rational choice theory. And when the neo-utilitarianism of rational choice IR theory created the reaction now termed "constructivism," the constructivists with *their* stress on agency, culture, identity and rules have recognized their affinity with the ES (cf. Wendt 1999; Dunne 1995). The New ES writers, while less radically hostile to neorealist formulations than their predecessors, still retain this distinctive focus.

### **The distinctive features of international society theory**

If there is one proposition that most ES theorists, with the exception of some members of the New ES, *can* agree on, it is that their referent object is not "world society" but a "society of states," an "international society." ES theorists do not necessarily deny that there exist the kinds of patterns of social interactions that have led others to talk of a world society, indeed, they do not necessarily object to the latter term itself; rather, their point is that these patterns take place in a context provided by a nexus of inter-state relations, and it is this context, the society of states, that is the proper focus for study. So much is agreed, but the idea of a "society of states" requires exegesis.

The first point that needs to be stressed, especially in the context of this volume, is that the noun “society” and the adjective “social” are used by IS theorists in ways that most sociologists would frown upon. Sociologists tend to regard “society” as conveying something highly significant and specific about the relationships it summarizes – this is, perhaps, particularly true for Parsonian sociology and MST. For IS theorists the term is used much more loosely; the “society of states” means little more than an association of states whose mutual relationships are norm-governed. This loose sense of the term society may upset sociologists, but as long as they realize that this is a term of art (a placeholder even) without the connotations their discipline would insist upon, mutual understanding need not be impeded.

The state-centric notion of an international society stands against the notion of an international system; both societies and systems are characterized by the existence of regularities (otherwise neither could exist) but in an international society these regularities are held to be norm-governed, whereas, in an international system, they are understood as the product simply of objective forces. To illustrate this distinction, consider briefly Bull and Waltz on the balance of power. For Waltz, the balance of power *is* the *Theory of International Politics*; balances are what *may* happen when states, seeking survival, respond to changes in the capabilities of other states – there is no guarantee that balances *will*, actually, emerge, but since states do not wish to suffer the damage which is a likely consequence of allowing another state to gain preponderance, there is a tendency for balancing behavior to take place (cf. Waltz 1979). No one actually wants to create a balance of power; it occurs, if it occurs, as an unintended consequence of the anarchy problematic. Bull examines this possibility and dismisses it; such a balance would be “fortuitous” and unstable (cf. Bull 1995 [1977]: 100). Balances of power will only exist if a significant number of powerful states choose to create and sustain them. The choice of and for a balance of power is not simply the product of a neo-utilitarian calculation to the effect that other strategies (predominance, band-wagoning, indifference) are non-viable at a reasonable cost – which would be consistent with neo-realist analysis – but rather is based on the positive position that the preservation of a society of states is desirable in its own terms. A balance of power ultimately rests on the self-restraint of states, and not simply on their ability to restrain others. In practice, there is only a small difference here between Bull and Waltz; in policy terms they would almost always produce the same advice, and a rational Waltzian world would be barely distinguishable from a norm-governed Bullian world. But the difference in terms of the structure of the argument is quite sharp.

IS theorists agree that the preservation of a society of states is desirable. Why? Bull suggests that a balance of power is an important feature of an international order, but order as such can hardly be the goal of a society of states; it makes very little sense to think of preserving an order simply because it is an order. Rather there must be something substantive about a society of states that is desirable. Here the relationship between IS and various conceptions of the *Good* becomes important.

On one account, a society of states is desirable because it constitutes a rational political order for humanity taken as a whole.<sup>2</sup> Human flourishing requires social intercourse which in turn requires political order, that is, a context within which the general arrangements of society can be attended to, laws made and enforced, hard cases adjudicated. Problems of scale alone would make a single global political order impossible. Laws lose their effectiveness at a distance, and tyranny is less likely if political society occurs on a human scale. Thus, a multiplicity of political authorities – a society of states – is the best arrangement for realizing the good for humanity taken as a whole. As Bull puts it, on this account, states are local agents of the common good. This approach to the society of states is to be found, amongst other places, in those eighteenth century writers who referred to the Europe of the day as “one great republic”; the existence of separate states preserved the “liberties” of each, but within a framework that provided the opportunity for the flourishing of all. This conception of a society of states does not, it should be noted, support a strong doctrine of sovereignty, and is, for example, consistent with the current international human rights regime. If the *telos* of international society is to promote human flourishing, sovereign rights cannot be used as an argument to support tyranny.

A related but contrasting account, also with some Aristotelian roots, but given a particularist spin, argues that the justification for a society of states is that it allows for the flourishing of *different* conceptions of the Good. International society is a practical association which is not to be associated with any particular understanding of the requirements of human flourishing. These requirements differ from place to place – the good society rests upon the shared understandings of members of a political community rather than on natural reason, and the purpose of a society of states is to allow these shared understandings to develop. This position has been well articulated by Terry Nardin, who adapts Michael Oakeshott’s distinction between a “civil association” and an “enterprise association” in order to argue that international society is analogous to the former, that is as a “practical association” which allows states to coexist in conditions of peace and justice (cf. Oakeshott 1975; Nardin 1983). Justice in this context, it should be noted, is to be understood in Oakeshottian terms as “procedural” (fair rules applied fairly) rather than “distributive,” and is clearly related to classical conceptions of international law. Such an approach is less obviously tied to a European, Christian view of the world (which may be a major advantage in the twenty-first century) more favorable to a strong doctrine of sovereignty, and somewhat skeptical of the legitimacy of an international human rights regime which is liable to rest upon one particular conception of the Good.

Neither version of the justification for international society is compatible with the neo-realist vision of the world. The society of states has a *telos*, there is a reason why we have and need an international society, whereas, from a neo-realist perspective, the existence of plural political authorities is contingent – it just happens to be the case that we have an anarchical system, everything else follows from this. There is much more that might be said about these issues – and a certain ambiguity about the notion that international society is norm-governed



will be explored below – but further points may perhaps best be made by reference to the contrast not between IS theory and neo-realism, but between a society of states and the many different notions of world society.

### **International society and the “cobweb” model of world society**

IS theorists have not engaged with Stanford School notions of world society, nor with Luhmann’s Modern Systems Theory, but John Burton’s notion of “world society” was, in the 1960s and 1970s, a subject of great interest and hostility to the British IS theorists of the day and, even though Burtonianism is no longer a major force, this engagement is worth considering for what it might tell us about world society more generally

Burton and his colleagues (especially Michael Banks, A.J.R. Groom and Christopher Mitchell) were simultaneously regarded as the London representatives of the behavioral revolution and, rather more plausibly, as the proponents of a substantive view of global politics radically at odds with the IS perspective (cf. Burton *et al.* 1974). IS theorists had no particular objection to the idea that it was possible to identify the kinds of “cobwebs” that Burton’s analysis was based on; a world society in the sense of such a network of social relationships could happily coexist with a society of states – indeed, Bull identifies just such a phenomenon, and the New ES is very interested in its dynamics (cf. Bull 1995 [1977]: 269). But, crucially, Burtonian analysis denied the possibility of such a coexistence, arguing instead that in so far as there was an inter-state *system*, it was non-social, and parasitic on world society. The dispute here revolves around fundamentals: the nature of the state, the role of power in social life and the origins of conflict.

From Burton’s perspective, conflict is a subjective phenomenon, always dysfunctional and always avoidable. There is no such thing as an objective conflict of interests; conflicts occur because individuals pursue incompatible goals/values, but there is no reason why they should not adjust their goals/values until they become completely compatible, in which case conflict is resolved (cf. Burton 1969, 1979). Since conflict is dysfunctional and avoidable, it is reasonable to ask why it is such an endemic feature of social life. Burton’s answer to this question rests on his account of the state. Systems of action, he argues, are, in principle, self-adjusting; the participants in “normal” social systems have no way of effectively resisting the pressures to adjust when change takes place. The privileged will engage in role defense, but unsuccessfully, because they have access only to resources within the system itself; they are obliged to change their goals/values to make them compatible with those of others. Role-defense is a universal phenomenon, but role defenders lack power, power being defined as *the capacity to resist change*. So why does conflict occur? Because some systems of action are not “normal”: administrative-political systems, i.e. states, cut across the boundaries of other systems of action, and claim the right to administer and regulate those systems within specific physical (as opposed to systemic) bound-

aries. States *do* have power, that is, the capacity to resist change, to act non-systemically – or at least think they do – and in the exercise of this power they *create* conflict.<sup>3</sup> This position can be summarized by a number of propositions, each contested by all varieties of IS theory.

First, all so-called international conflict is the result of the internationalizing of domestic conflict. There is no such thing as a "security dilemma"; notions such as the balance of power are fictions serving the interests of state bureaucrats. Clearly IS theorists would not subscribe to the idea that *all* international conflict has domestic roots. Second, it is the state that creates conflict via its ability to resist change. Power is vested in the state and only in the state, because only the state has the capacity to employ non-systemic forces in order to resist change. From an IS perspective this is plain wrong; power is a feature of all social relationships and although the sovereign state may hold a monopoly on the legitimate exercise of force this does not mean it is the sole holder of power. Third, the state is, thus, the problem not the solution; in the absence of state power conflict would not arise, or would disappear, problems would be solved "systemically," i.e. without resort to non-systemic resources. This applies to apparent conflicts over material resources, but also to the politics of "identity" – from a Burtonian perspective, identity is a central need of individuals but a need that can be met without conflict. That identity often seems a source of conflict is misleading – it is the use of state power to buttress an identity that creates conflict.

IS theorists vehemently resisted this latter conclusion. A variety of different understandings of the nature of the state are compatible with an IS perspective, from the liberal notion that the state is the solution to certain problems of collective action through to the more positive role assigned to the institution by Hegelians (and Kantians), but the notion that the state actually *creates* problems simply will not do. Burton denied that he was an anarchist, arguing instead that what he sought were "legitimate" states, but it was difficult to see how his notion of legitimacy, which rested on the acceptance of the authority of the state by all its citizens, could plausibly be met.

As this sketch of the issues indicates, the confrontation between Burton's vision of a world society and the ES notion of an international society was more or less total. Indeed, in some respects Burton's position was closer to that of a hard-line realist than to that of an IS theorist. His account of the state as simply a concentration of power, his belief that international law represented the will of the strong, his rejection of the idea that inter-state relations could be norm-governed and his skepticism towards international institutions all aligned him much more closely with the kind of extreme power politics that even the more "realist" inclined IS theorists wanted to distance themselves from.

What is rather more difficult to predict is what the relationship between Burtonian world society theory and IS theory would have been had Burton's formulations been rather less uncompromising, had he argued, for example, not that "all," but "most," or even "almost all" conflict is of domestic origin? A Burtonian analysis combined with an openness towards different perspectives at

the inter-state level might well have been able to strike a *modus vivendi* with ES thinking. As noted above, there is nothing inherent to ES thinking that leads to the denial that a world society could exist. What is at stake is the role (and relative importance) of a society of states as a subset, or special case, of such a world society. The pluralist, “complex interdependence” school which flourished briefly in the 1970s treated conventional inter-state relations as just such a special case. However, complex interdependence had a more conventional notion of power than that proposed by Burtonians (cf. Keohane and Nye 1977: 11). The Burtonian notion of “non-systemic” behavior – that is, failing to handle problems from the perspective of the system in which they occur, employing resources from other contexts in order to resist change – is difficult to fit into an IS perspective, and in so far as “world society” is tied up with such a conception of power there is little chance of a meeting of minds. But is it? The Frankfurt–Darmstadt conception of world society (on which see, for example, Albert *et al.* 2000), while sympathetic to Burtonian ideas, is also open to an engagement with the ES. In effect, these scholars – who, not coincidentally, are more attuned to changes in the world economy than was Burtonian thought in the 1960s and 1970s – are taking up the notion of a world society of individuals identified by Bull and working through what such a society would mean for the society of states in a way that Bull never did. Second, however, there are contemporary writers on “world society” who are relatively untouched by Burtonian thought, and the next sections of this chapter will examine their work.

### **International society and contemporary theories of world society**

Non-Burtonian notions of world society, as developed by the so-called Stanford School or, in the form of the “society of society,” by MST, have not attracted the attention of ES theorists, but we can still ask whether these newer notions can engage constructively with ES thinking. A structurally similar question can be posed from the other direction. “Stanford” and MST have had some engagement with conventional international relations theory, but the theory in question is almost always “realism,” which, in this context is taken to encompass modern neo-realism, its classical realist precursors, and, sometimes, its modern “constructivist” critics. The notion of a society of states as developed by Bull, Wight *et al.* is rarely subjected to scrutiny. This neglect may be simply a matter of non-exposure to “English School” thinking or it may be that, in so far as the latter is known, it is taken to be covered by the broad notion of “realism.” In other words, the idea of an international *society* is taken to be a rather loose, sociologically imprecise, way of describing the inter-state *system*. As suggested above, this (implicit) equation of IS theory with realism may not in fact be unreasonable, but a question remains. Just as we need to ask whether contemporary theorists of world society are interestingly and relevantly different from Burtonian analysis, so we need to ask whether the neglect of IS theory by those contemporary theorists can be justified.

At the level of ontology, the gap between IS theory and both Stanford and MST appears great, indeed possibly unbridgeable. At a first approximation, ES thinkers take "the state" to be ontologically prior to the "society of states." Certainly, a major proposition of most IS theorists is that it is quite possible, probable indeed, that "states" (using the term loosely to describe any territorially-based political unit) can exist without forming a "society"; the work of Martin Wight is instructive here and – although Alan James denies that there is a substantive difference between "system" and "society" – expressive of a near-consensus (cf. Wight 1977; James 1993). Moreover this is one area where ES theory and neo-realism make contact with each other – see, for example, Robert Gilpin's defense of realism which stresses the ontological primacy of the group (cf. Gilpin 1984). Contemporary world society theory sees things radically differently. The "Stanford" approach stresses the extent to which states are shaped by world-wide cultural and associational processes, and thus clearly assigns ontological priority to world society as such; ontology is a complex issue in MST, which Albert in this volume describes as "anti-ontological," but the very notion of a self-reflective, autopoietic system would tell against any notion of the primacy of the components of a system (which, in any event, are not states). There is, thus, a difference between both of these (very different approaches) and IS theory. But is this a difference that makes a difference? Not, perhaps, as much as one might have expected in the case of the Stanford School.

Although Stanford writers argue that nation state identities, structures and behaviors are shaped by world society, this does not imply that for them states are weak actors, or that their behavior is directly determined by world societal factors, that they have no positive role in meeting the needs of their populations, that they are the sole wielders of power in world society or, always, the source of conflict in world society – in other words, Stanford's account of world society carries very few Burtonian over/undertones. Rather, the proposition is that "world culture celebrates, expands, and standardizes strong but culturally somewhat tamed national actors" (Meyer *et al.* 1997: 173) a proposition to which most IS theorists could happily give substantial assent. A feature of the "society of states" is that it also "tames" national actors, socializing them to behave in particular kinds of ways. In the nineteenth century this was known as imposing the "standards of civilization" on regimes that did not practice the rule of law, or respect property rights in ways that the members of the then predominantly European society of states considered adequate; "cultural taming" is a rather good, albeit somewhat euphemistic, term to describe this process (cf. Gong 1984). And, as in the case of the Stanford School, IS theory does not suggest that this process of socialization turns states into weak actors, lacking in autonomy. Rather the proposition is that the self-restraint involved in being a member of the society of states, the willingness to accept certain authoritative practices of law and diplomacy, is ultimately a source of strength. Reversing the matter, one of the points of Wight's studies of premodern systems of states was that the members of these systems may have been less constrained by such practices but actually were less secure, less capable of assuring their own survival as a result (cf. Wight 1977).

The Stanford School and the English School are not saying the same thing here, but in terms of their practical implications the two approaches are not always and necessarily incompatible. This connection may be due to the existence in both bodies of thought of “structurationist” tendencies. From an IS point of view, states are ontologically prior to the society of states and there is no sense that they are constituted by that society – this is in contrast to a fully systemic theory such as that of Wallerstein, where the actors are understood as created by the system (cf. Wallerstein 1974). On the other hand, membership of a society of states is clearly understood to change somewhat the character of the state – how much this character is changed is a matter of dispute between the various branches of IS theory, but that there is some change seems undeniable. In other words there is a sense in which the state and the society of states are seen as “co-constituted”; it is this position that establishes a link between IS theory and “constructivism,” and establishes the difference between IS theory and constructivism on the one hand, and neo-realism on the other, the latter being committed to the idea that the collective identities of actors are irrelevant to their international behavior. Constructivists may put much more stress on the importance of collective identity than IS theorists, but the underlying mechanism of co-constitution is present in both approaches (cf. Dunne 1995; Wendt 1999). And, it seems, in the Stanford School’s approach to world society, Stanford may have a different starting point here (society rather than the state) but the shaping process is, surely, not in one direction only. The state is shaped by world society, but in turn shapes that society. The differences of emphasis here between Stanford and the IS approach are considerable, but there is an underlying compatibility.

A further element of compatibility between Stanford and IS theory lies in the role of international institutions (in the broad sense of that term). The Stanford approach places a great deal of stress on the role of institutions in building up the fabric of world society. This stress on the constructive role of institutions is wholly compatible with IS theory, most variants of which are happy to stress the importance of institutions in the broad sense of regular patterns of behavior – the society of states could not exist without such regularity. From an IS point of view “institutions” would include such practices as the balance of power (and, possibly, international war), which may not be where world society theorists would look, but, again, there is an underlying compatibility of approach here.

In summary, Stanford School theorists of world society are already interested in constructivism, and this interest might well be expanded profitably to include the International Society theorists. By the same token, ES theorists ought to pay more attention to the sociological approach to world society represented by Stanford. Martin Shaw rightly points to the state-centricity of IS theory as a barrier to understanding many social processes important in today’s world, but state-centricity is a defining feature of a “society of states” approach and cannot simply be abandoned (Shaw 1994). Rather, IS theorists need to be more open to exploring ways in which their state-centricity can be made compatible with the consideration of a wider range of global social interactions; the Stanford approach may provide an opening here which ought not to be as neglected as it has been.

## Modern Systems Theory and international society

It is much more difficult to establish contact between MST and the English School. One of the defining documents of the ES is Bull’s critique of the “scientific” approach to international relations, and one of the targets of that critique was the “General Systems Theory” of the 1950s, an obvious precursor of Luhmann’s thought. Bull saw such theory as excessively abstract, and divorced from the real world of politics, and no doubt he would regard the notion of a “society of society” in the same light. Moreover, this is not simply a case of ignorance leading to dismissal – it is more plausible that the more the ES learnt about MST, the less they would like it!

The fundamental point here is truly basic and concerns Luhmann’s concept of a system.<sup>4</sup> From his perspective, societies are composed of systems which are self-reflective relations of communication. Human beings are not the components whose interactions create systems, societies are not composed of human beings and thus the “society of societies” is not composed of human beings at one remove. Societies are not normatively integrated. All of this contradicts the implicit ontology of the IS approach, which *does* see the state as in some sense a representative of society, and society as composed of human interactions. Societies generally are seen as normatively integrated, as is the society of states, in this case the normative integration is understood as taking place via the authoritative practices of international law and diplomacy. There is clearly an irreconcilable set of differences here, more stark than is the case with the other conceptions of world society discussed in this paper – even Burtonian analysis wishes to see normative integration taking place at some level (hence the importance of legitimacy to Burton). In short, IS theory, along with other branches of conventional IR theory, is wedded to the very notion of “society” drawn from Durkheim, Weber and the other founders of sociology which MST specifically rejects. The gap here is genuinely unbridgeable.

Because of this unbridgeable gap, apparent similarities and points of contact between MST and IS theory tend to dissolve under close analysis. Thus, the idea of “international society” might be seen by a Modern Systems Theorist as a rather quaint, unsophisticated and misleading way of describing the territorially differentiated political system of world society which could be corrected and insights produced by incorporating MST. This, however, would be to gloss over two key features of ES thought; on the one hand it would obliterate the distinction between “society” and “system” which, as we have seen, is central to ES thinking, while on the other it would deny the *sui generis* character of the “society of states” – for the ES, although states form (or can form) a society, this is a society which is distinctive from other societies, precisely because its members are states and not natural persons. In the context of this volume it hardly needs to be stressed that every aspect of this position is denied by MST – the very idea that there could be a separate “society” of states is denied in principle by the latter.

## **Conclusion: norms and the international society approach**

The claim that the society of states is norm-governed, denied by Modern Systems Theorists, is regarded as tautological by IS theorists; as noted above, this is what “society” means to ES theorists. There is, however, a certain amount of ambiguity connected to the notion of a “norm” in ES thought. In ordinary language, reference to a norm conveys both the idea of regular patterns of behavior (“a standard, a type: what is expected or regarded as normal, customary behaviour, appearance etc.” – *New Shorter Oxford Dictionary*) and the idea that the pattern in question is morally or otherwise desirable. These two meanings are, in principle, separable – IS theory, on the other hand, characteristically allows one meaning to slide into another, without necessarily acknowledging that this is what is happening.

Take, for example, the widely held proposition that non-intervention is a norm of (classical) international society; is this a statement about what *is* (or at least was) regarded as normal, customary behavior in international society, or about what *ought to be* regarded as normal, customary behavior? Since intervening in one another’s affairs has been a more or less constant feature of *actual* state behavior in the modern period – as Stephen Krasner has documented (cf. Krasner 1999) – it would be difficult to argue the former, but IS theorists are reluctant to acknowledge that when they write about norms they are actually making “ought-to-be” statements. In effect, the two meanings of norms are elided, which causes confusion when there is actually another set of rules in operation – for example, during the Cold War, when “normal, customary behavior” was to prevent defection from one’s alliance, if this could be done at a reasonable cost.

The best defense of norms in international society employs some Wittgensteinian thoughts on game-playing and the rules of the game; Friedrich Kratochwil’s brand of constructivism is particularly relevant here (cf. Kratochwil 1989, 1995). Sovereignty is a constitutive rule of international society, rather than something that regulates a pre-existing society of states. Without this rule international society could not exist, hence when actually intervening, states are obliged to explain how such behavior can be understood in terms of the rules (e.g. as misunderstood, or as a justified exception) because failure to do so would, as it were, end the game – and thereby end the capacity of rulers to claim the status of sovereign, since this status only exists by virtue of the existence of international society. Since rulers do not wish to surrender their claim to sovereignty they cannot simply declare that they could and would do anything they could get away with in order to further their interests. This is why such declarations do not take place, and why international society can be seen as rule- (or norm) governed. This is a compelling argument, and Krasner’s response, which is, roughly, that the Westphalian system is not a game and therefore has no constitutive rules, misses the point of this kind of argument; the Westphalian system is a (Wittgensteinian) game because it is played as such, not because of some extra-game attributes observable in the “real” world (Krasner 1999). On the other hand, this defense of the reality of norms in international society, although

successful on its own terms, is much “thinner” in content than most ES scholars would wish. To get back to the starting point of this digression, does it follow from the existence of such a set of constitutive rules that international society is actually “normatively integrated”? Not if “normative integration” implies that this set of rules actually describe the ways in which states behave.

In short, ES theory characteristically uses the same terminology of rules and norms to describe both the ways in which states *actually* behave (a matter for empirical observation) and the way in which they *ought to* behave (the product of a moral discourse). This procedure, when acknowledged, is justified via an argument about the genesis of norms – norms are assumed to be both the product of the interactions of states and regulative of those interactions. Norms are, in this sense, similar to the rules of positive international law, generated by the practices of states but alleged to govern those practices; it should be noted, however, that this process produces a very “thin” account of international society, and it is not clear how, for example, the thicker – solidarist – international society envisaged by N.J. Wheeler as created by “norm-entrepreneurs” could emerge in this way (cf. Wheeler 2000).

None of this brings IS theory any closer to MST but it does suggest that one of the key factors that ES writers have regarded as distinctive to their work, and one which certainly distinguishes it from Luhmann’s formulations, is a little less well established than they might wish to believe. To this point must be added another: the state-centricity of the ES and the insistence of its founders that international society is *sui generis* looks increasingly under threat in an age of apparent globalization, a point the New ES has recognized by shifting the emphasis of their research program away from international society (cf. Buzan 1999). Taken together, these points suggest that both the normative and the empirical framework within which international society is conventionally located is somewhat unstable. This may leave the road open for a re-examination of both the notion of “society” and that of “system,” and to this re-examination MST may have something to contribute. Still, as ought to be clear from the above discussion, for the ES human agency has always been and will remain, I think, central, and this represents a formidable obstacle for any serious engagement between Luhmann and even the New English School.

## Notes

- 1 This chapter draws heavily on “World Society and the English School: An International Society Perspective on World Society,” in *European Journal of International Relations* (2001) 7 (4): 423–41.
- 2 The positions outlined in this and the next paragraph are close to (but not identical with) those of the “solidarists” and “pluralists” identified by N.J. Wheeler (Wheeler 1992).
- 3 This account of Burton’s theory is based on Burton 1968, 1969 and 1979; the more extreme implications of these positions are not always apparent in texts such as Burton 1972.
- 4 The characterization of Luhmann’s systems theory is based on Luhmann (1997a) and Albert (1999).



## 6 Sociological institutionalism and the empirical study of world society

*George M. Thomas*

Much of sociological institutionalist thinking about world society and world culture was developed through inferential reasoning (cf. Meyer 1980; Thomas *et al.* 1987). Empirical observations present puzzles for actor-centered theories that start with interested, realist actors, whether individuals or states, and also for theories that reduce action to economic or power differences. The primary empirical generalization that is a problem for these theories is that there is a great deal of isomorphism across nation states which otherwise vary greatly in history, development, political-economic power, and local arrangements. We cautiously posited the existence of world society, recognizing the controversial nature of this line of theorizing. Now, while the idea remains controversial, debates have shifted somewhat from whether or not it exists to how best to study it.

An institutionalist definition of world society is very close to Roland Robertson's (1992) definitive conceptualization of globalization: the compression of the world into a global whole to which people are oriented as one place in one time/history. Its study includes different types of actors such as nation states, transnational corporations (TNCs), international governmental organizations (IGOs), international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), individuals, and other groups and forms of collective action. There is no world empire (cf. Wallerstein 1974) or state (cf. Meyer 1980). This condition has been conceptualized as "anarchy" (cf. Bull 1995 [1977]) which, if read narrowly as the absence of bureaucratic, rational-legal government and as not precluding "governance," is accurate (cf. Rosenau and Czempiel 1992).

World society is characterized by cultural or institutional structures. By culture I do not mean a functionally stable homogeneity associated with classical ethnographies nor an internalized consensual value system. Institutions are cultural rules, principles, and models of reality that give ontological value to actors and actions. They are elaborated in a structured order of things (cf. Douglas 1966; Berger and Luckmann 1966). Institutional structures are built into the practices of everyday life and the legal, economic, political, and scientific theories of society, and they are constitutive of actors. World institutional structures are highly rationalistic in the Weberian sense of instrumental rationality. Rationalization is the structuring of everyday life everywhere and with increasing specificity within standardized impersonal rules that constitute action and organization as means to collective purposes.

Global rationalism is applied across differentiated spheres and articulated with regional, national, and local cultures. The result is that cultural elements are taken out of historical contexts, what Appadurai (1996) refers to as disjunctures, and combined with other elements from other sources, what Hannerz (1987) terms creolization and what Nederveen Pieterse (1995) calls hybridization.

Because of differentiation and cultural hybridization, many assert that in rationalistic societies there is no overarching authority apart from a bureaucratic state, and so the stateless world is viewed as sparse morally. Yet, global rationalism is a moral order. Violations, even minor ones, threaten to bring down pollution and chaos (cf. Douglas 1966) and at micro-levels of everyday interaction are treated severely (cf. Garfinkel 1967; Goffman 1959). There is an overarching diffuse, moral authority to rationalistic world society that devolves onto actors who are authorized to organize and act in the name of collectives. The most rationalistic oriented actors enact moral order (cf. Lipschutz 2001; Mansbach and Wilmer 2001). States are authorized and obligated to enact and guarantee human rights. Individuals are authorized and obligated to pursue self-interest and also to organize for the collective good. Associations elaborate global rationalism, articulating it with specific contexts and pressing actors to conform.

The conjunction of a universal, structuring moral order and differentiated, stratified situations creates contradictions and gaps between goals and outcomes, between formal policy and actions. These contradictions and gaps result in decoupling formal goals and policies from everyday life, whether we are speaking of organizations (cf. Meyer and Scott 1983) or interactions (cf. Goffman 1983). They also make social organization vulnerable to charges that it is illegitimate, hypocritical, and in general a failure in goal attainment and vulnerable to demands for change. This tendency toward rational, moralistic change is reinforced by the fact that individuals are authorized to act and organize.

In this view, actors such as individuals, corporations, and states are constituted by and act within a global institutional structure or environment. A major part of sociological institutionalism's research agenda thus is to study world society as a world culture. What is world culture's structure and content? How does it affect actors? How is it played out in actions, usually implicitly but often explicitly? Methodologically, this perspective employs a non-controversial sociological principle: cultural assumptions are implicit in all action. Culture and action are "co-inherent," and we distinguish them analytically. We study all actors of world society to make inferences about the cultural order implicit, although sometimes explicit, in their practices and discourse. This perspective directs us to take seriously associational actors such as INGOs that carry rational, moral authority without legal, economic, or political power.

Sociological institutionalism and Luhmann's systems theory share some basic similarities and differences over these aspects of world society. The both differ from most systems theories by arguing that world society is not integrated. Global rationalism constitutes society as being functionally integrated, but, according to institutionalism and other cultural theories, this is a depiction by rationalistic culture itself, an ideological claim (cf. Berger and Luckmann 1966).

Both approaches conceptualize endogenous change, but systems theory views change as being driven by differentiation whereas sociological institutionalism sees it driven by rationalism. Neither approach is actor-centered, and both reject realist assumptions about states and individuals. Sociological institutionalism, however, focuses more on how institutional structures constitute actors, conceptualizing organizations, for example, as open rather than closed systems.

In the next part of this chapter, I describe the sociological institutionalist perspective by presenting its research agenda. I describe first longitudinal research designs for analyzing changes in world culture and then longitudinal and cross-sectional designs for analyzing the effects of world culture on nation states and on non-state actors such as TNCs and ethno-cultural, religious groups. I then briefly note that sociological institutionalism conceptualizes change as endogenous. In the last part of the chapter, I compare and contrast sociological institutionalism's approach to world society with Luhmann's systems theory. I focus on their commonalities in contrast with other theories in the field (both view world society as not integrated, both reject actor-centered approaches, and both view change as endogenous) and on what distinguishes them from each other (differences over differentiation and rationalism and over the constituting of actors such as organizations). The goal is to identify conjunctures and disjunctures that will help each approach sharpen its theorizing of world society. I suggest that a good part of the conversation must be to identify the relevant empirical knowledge and to clarify the relation between constitutive contexts and actor identities and agency.

## **Research agenda for studying world society**

### ***World society/world culture***

Sociological institutionalism draws attention to the world cultural context of actors and their practices. Moreover, it broadens our attention from nation states (the inter-state system) and transnational corporations (the world economic system) to an increasing variety of actors such as international organizations and activist networks and increasingly elaborated and differentiated international law. INGOs are an especially interesting type of actor with increasing influence in world society, and understanding how they are embedded in world cultural contexts tells us much about world culture in world society (cf. Boli and Thomas 1999). They are not-for-profit organizations that are not established or run by states.

INGOs make claims that are predicated on universal relevance: global humanity, human nature, and human agency comprise their primary referent. Organizational goals and practices are individualistic: these organizations are ideologically committed to democratic governance, memberships are confined to individuals and associations of individuals, and principles of individual fulfillment and understanding occur across a wide range of goals. Their goals and structures also document the dominance of global rationalism. Just over a third

of all INGOs by the 1970s had as their goals science, medicine/health, technical standards, and infrastructure/communication. Progress defined broadly as human development is to be attained through rational social action. At the same time, broad definitions of progress and prevalent attention to health, the body, leisure, and sport reflect a dialectic in which more subjective aspects of the human person are increasingly accounted and organized worldwide.

INGOs lack political and economic power and they have no rational-legal authority; yet, they are influential, welding a diffuse rational-moral authority (cf. Boli and Thomas 1999). They are authorized as the expression of individual agency through voluntarism: as associations of freely associating individuals, they carry the moral authority of humanity. This is a sociality (cf. Albrow 1996), the associational authority that Tocqueville observed in the nineteenth-century USA.

These world cultural elements are embodied in the world citizen. INGOs operate in a world in which every individual is invested with agency to organize for global, human purposes. World citizenship, of course, has not replaced national citizenship any more than the rise of national citizenship replaced identities based on family or ethnicity.

INGOs are part and parcel of world society. INGOs emerged in the nineteenth century and increased substantially at the turn of the twentieth century. Foundings declined just before the First World War, but quickly increased afterwards, sustaining this growth until the 1930s when they again declined. After the Second World War, the founding rate of INGOs literally exploded with high rates continuing into the next century. The striking thing about this pattern of growth is its strong correspondence to other global indicators. Over the course of the century, world totals of measures such as state revenues, exports, energy production, primary educational enrollments, and inter-state treaties are correlated .87 and higher with INGO foundings (cf. Boli and Thomas 1999). The increased numbers and the high inter-associations suggest a more coherent, denser global order over a longer period of time than neo-realist or international relations institutionalist theories can explain.

Scholars and practitioners increasingly view the global field as a civil society in which associational collective actions including INGOs attempt to influence IGOs and states (e.g., Castermans *et al.* 1991; Charnovitz 1997; Florini 2000; Fox and Brown 1998; Hulme and Edwards 1997; Otto 1996; Willetts 1982, 1996). Many INGOs work behind the scenes in areas such as standardization (cf. Loya and Boli 1999; Brunsson and Jacobsson 2000). Many others operate as social movements or transnational activists (cf. Guidry *et al.* 2000; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Smith and Johnston 2002; Wapner 1996). Many, sometimes the same ones, operate as expert knowledge professionals (cf. Haas 1992) or disinterested "others" (cf. Meyer 1994), claiming to represent universal humanity. INGOs make claims on and are consulted by formal authorities from nation states to UN agencies, resulting in the diffusion of world cultural models and principles (Strang and Meyer 1993).

Longitudinal studies analyze how INGOs construct issues, mobilize collective action, and pressure IGOs and states, and how the content, strategies, and effects

of INGOs change over time. Longitudinal studies show substantial changes in ideology within issue areas such as women's rights (cf. Berkovitch 1999). Early women's international organizing at the turn of the twentieth century made claims based on a special status of women and mothers. By mid-century, the ideology had shifted to women as individuals. The expansion and success of these organizations and their claims increased substantially when after the Second World War they became linked to development which by then already dominated world culture (cf. Chabbott 1999). Other studies show a parallel shift of official population policies from pro-natal to anti-natal positions (cf. Barrett and Frank 1999). INGOs led the way, articulating planned population control with development and influencing the UN and development agencies.

Similar research designs demonstrate the use of expert knowledge and rational-voluntaristic authority by issue-specific INGOs to influence IGOs. For example, Mei and Thomas (2002) show that the International Organization of Consumer Unions (IOCU) during the 1960s lobbied the United Nations to put consumer rights on its agenda. This effort resulted in the 1969 UN *Declaration of Social Progress and Development* (United Nations 1969) defining "the protection of the consumer" as a core aspect of development. The IOCU subsequently set out to elaborate and rationalize what consumer rights and protection meant. This work culminated in its drafting what became the 1985 UN *Guidelines for Consumer Protection*.

Comparisons of different INGOs and issue sectors over time would help identify the organizational and area-specific conditions for effective influence on IGOs. From the other side, studies of targeted IGOs can illuminate how and to what extent their policies historically have been influenced by world cultural factors (e.g., see the studies of the impact of different INGOs on the World Bank collected in Fox and Brown 1998). This level of analysis further allows us to examine the extent to which change is primarily adaptation to external cultural forces and to what extent an organization can buffer its practices from external scrutiny.

### ***Effects on nation states***

Much empirical work within sociological institutionalism has focused on world cultural effects on the nation state. These studies document structural isomorphism across states, despite the great variation in civilizational histories, colonial and post-colonial experiences, resources, nature of civil societies, and security interests. Isomorphism exists in many issue sectors (cf. Meyer *et al.* 1997) such as women's educational incorporation and formal rights (cf. Bradley and Ramirez 1996; Ramirez *et al.* 1997), mass schooling curricula (cf. Meyer *et al.* 1992), population policies (cf. Barrett and Frank 1999), national account statistics and censuses (cf. McNeely 1995; Ventresca 1995), museums/tourism (cf. Anderson 1991; MacCannell 1976), and welfare (cf. Abbot and DeViney 1992).

Sociological institutionalism argues that an important process producing this isomorphism is one in which actors connect identities and actions to universal

models. International organizations play an important role in this process. Consider the central proposition that nation states are constituted by world institutional structures through the practices of diverse actors. This rather abstract proposition has been documented by McNeely (1995) who examined how admission to the United Nations effectively establishes the existence of a nation state. The discourse of UN debates on whether or not to admit particular “problem cases” shows that the presence of a governmental apparatus with claimed jurisdiction over a territory is enough to be accepted as a state. Responsibility for bringing about effective governing in the newly recognized state subsequently is assigned to the inter-state system, to the UN and its member states, including the adoption of democracy as a set of institutions and practices (cf. Diamond 1993). Impressionistic evidence suggests that the bases for recognition as a nation state might be expanded to include evidence of “peoplehood,” evidenced by such things as an authoritative history or narrative. This is the case already for establishing the status of a “nation within a nation.”

Other research analyzes how international organizations influence nation states to establish particular structures and policies that reflect world institutional models. For example, once the UN included consumer protection in its 1969 *Declaration*, nation states attempted to demonstrate their conformity by establishing national consumer protection/rights agencies, the number of which skyrocketed in the 1970s. With the issuing of the 1985 *Guidelines*, states throughout the world attempted to show conformity, but the guidelines are fairly complex. Both the UN and nation states went to the IOCU for expert advice. Global civil society actors such as INGOs initiate agendas resulting in nation states calling on the very same actors to help them implement those agendas (cf. Mei and Thomas 2002).

One early prediction of sociological institutionalism is that there are material payoffs for conforming, however ritualistically, to world culture. Testing this requires analyzing flows of resources into states that vary in their degree of conformity to world cultural principles. Barrett and Tsui (1999) do this and show that states with a formal population policy obtain substantially greater aid from external sources.

The theory also expects, however, that taking on universal models incurs costs. Hybridization is built into a state that is fractured horizontally among disparate agencies and policies often at odds with each other (cf. Meyer 1999). Vertically, each level of organization is decoupled from those above it, and thus local practices are decoupled from formal national plans (cf. Fuller 1991). This line of research corrects a mis-perception of sociological institutionalism. Because of the significance of structural isomorphism across national polities, it is often concluded incorrectly that the theory predicts complete homogeneity. In actuality, it predicts that structural isomorphism results in decoupling and a myriad of contradictions and conflicts at all levels.

Furthermore, it is possible to put local and national collective action in a world cultural context. For example, collective action theory tells us that state structures and policies shape social movement demands. INGOs and IGOs

affect domestic collective action, both by impacting nation-state policies and through direct mobilization.

### ***Effects on non-state actors***

There is an extensive sociological institutionalist research program on organizations (cf. Meyer and Scott 1983). The application to transnational corporations (TNCs) is straightforward: TNCs must adapt to the global organizational environment even though they tend to view conformity to transnational norms as limiting their free pursuit of self-interest. Moral entrepreneurs play a major role in bringing world cultural principles and world public opinion to bear on TNCs, creating costs for non-conformity (cf. Colonomos and Santiso 2002).

Another extension of this research is to ethnic and religious identities. Ethno-cultural groups find that world institutions can play an important role in mobilization. They increasingly construct primordiality through world cultural discourse (cf. Brysk 2000). There is a natural tendency to view religion in a global context as the source of differences and fragmentation. Despite very different local situations and different religious traditions, however, religious movements exhibit remarkable similarities throughout the world. One line of analysis views religions in different traditions as engaging global rationalism either by constituting themselves as private spiritualities or as sources of moral order for political authority and collective identity (cf. Thomas 1996, 2001). Politicized fundamentalisms and religious nationalism target the nation state (cf. Casanova 1994; Juergensmeyer 1993; Rudolph and Piscatori 1997); yet, they constitute particularistic and nationalistic identities in a highly universalistic style (cf. Robertson 1992). Increasingly, these politically oriented movements are transnational in scope and target IGOs and INGOs beyond the nation state. Coalitions of Protestant, Catholic, and Islamic groups at the population conferences are examples of the active role of religion in global civil society.

### ***Endogenous change***

The primary source of endogenous global change is the combination of universal rationalism and the contradictions among and uneven applications of world-cultural principles. Global rationalism is a project that demands greater levels of rational organizing for value attainment; yet, attempts to rationalize all aspects of life produce conflicts and gaps. Often, rational policies are not implemented, and goals are not attained. The universalism of the culture results in defining these shortcomings as social problems. Individuals are invested with agency to organize to demand solutions. While many of these demands rhetorically claim that rationalization should be tempered, solutions generally increase the overall elaboration of rationalistic institutions. An agency-structure dialectic is at work: as world ideology intensifies, movements focus on contradictions, resulting in further elaboration of world culture. If this is accurate, we should be able to document the spread of stylized moral discourse centering on the identi-

fied world-cultural themes and their violations. Studies of issue areas already cited give evidence that this in fact happens. If we collate contested issues across sectors, we will be able to assess if types and styles of conflict recur.

## **Perspectives on world society**

Systems-theoretic and cultural/structural approaches are very different from each other, and they are viewed usually as incommensurable. This might ultimately be true for Luhmann's systems theory and sociological institutionalism as well, but several important commonalities make it worth exploring their different approaches as complementary.

Social scientific theories can be categorized by how they answer two questions (cf. Alexander 1987). First, does a theory explain social processes from the point of view of the individual actor or on the basis of collective (structural) properties and processes? Second, does a theory assume that the action of individual actors is fundamentally rational or non-rational, where non-rational means having to do with enactment, status, and ceremony? Sociological institutionalism takes a structural perspective and assumes action is non-rational. Thus for the study of world society, it views "real" actors such as individuals, states, and corporations as being embedded in global institutional structures. It is something of a neo-Grotian view that world culture is relatively autonomous from and not reducible to actor interests. Yet, sociological institutionalism is also an interpretive theory which assumes that actors construct identities and meanings in practice and that local hybrid cultural forms are embedded in broad institutional structures.

Its structural starting point is one basic commonality with systems theory: both reject actor-centered approaches. Both, moreover, focus on the processes (contextual or systemic) beyond individuals and nation states. The major difference between cultural/structural theories and systems theories generally is that the latter make assumptions that systems are integrated or have integrating feedback loops while structural theories do not. Luhmann (1982e), however, argues that world society as a system is not in fact integrated, and this probably more than anything else enables the two approaches to be viewed as complementary (cf. Albert 1999). Both, moreover, view change as endogenous to world society. Since there is one unit, change necessarily must be accountable from within it, and this is underscored by each emphasizing systemic and structural processes relatively autonomous from actors.

Luhmann's theory views world society processes primarily in terms of communication and knowledge, and sociological institutionalism with its emphasis on global culture thus is much closer to it than to other IR approaches to world society. This is illustrated by contrasting sociological institutionalism with the English School of IR theory. The English School theorists (cf. Buzan 1993, 1996; Dunne 1998; see the chapter by Brown in this volume) argue that world society is distinct from the international system (the network of interdependent exchanges) and international society (roughly, the inter-state system). World society in this view refers to the proliferating number of other actors such



as INGOs, norms, and implicit cultural understandings. The similarities are important. Nevertheless, sociological institutionalism attributes to world society a greater density of institutionalized cultural structures and greater autonomy relative to actors. It blurs distinctions among international systems, international society, and world society, and thus concurs with the chapter by Brock, who views historical change as changing configurations of the three. Moreover, it is closer to Wight and Watson than to Bull when it asserts that networks of actions are embedded in historical-cultural structures (see Wæver 1996; Wight 1966; 1991; Watson 1992; Bull 1995 [1977]).

Luhmann's systems theory and sociological institutionalism thus together can be contrasted with other approaches, but we can sharpen their formulations by exploring their differences. Two similarities provide points of departure. First, while both view change as endogenous, systems theory views differentiation as the central process but sociological institutionalism views rationalization as the primary dynamic. Second, neither approach is actor-centered, but sociological institutionalism is an interpretative theory and analyses how actors are constituted with agency to act, leading to different interpretations of agency and of organizations.

### ***Differentiation versus rationalization***

Systems and structural-functional theories use the concept of differentiation to explain the origins and dynamics of modernity. The general form of the argument is that increased density and complexity of interaction and communication result in the need to reduce or manage competition and to increase coordination and control. Differentiation meets these needs. In this view, differentiation is a natural solution to systemic problems rooted in the nature of human society and not in culture or history. Luhmann emphasizes the flow of information and knowledge through communication and thus culture is more relevant to his theory; but world society is viewed more as a system of communication than of culture *per se*. Thus, the process of increasing rationality is derivative, something of a "rationalization" after the fact. If rationality has consequences, they ultimately are traceable to differentiation as an adaptation to complexity and interdependence.

Sociological institutionalists point to several empirical problems with attributing the central dynamic to differentiation. First, it is difficult to explain formal differentiation by its practical effects because actual practices tend to be only loosely linked or coupled with formal rules. This is true within modern societies across social sectors and organizations and it is also true within organizations (cf. Meyer and Rowan 1977). The empirical work has examined a wide variety of formal organizations including nation states (cf. Meyer and Scott 1983; Meyer *et al.* 1997).

Another problem is that systems theories view differentiated sectors and organizations as closed systems with disparate logics and no common overarching cultural structure. Modern differentiated systems, it is argued, lack a homo-

genous, common culture attributed to societies low in differentiation (cf. Douglas 1966). Empirically however, societies low in differentiation are not as homogeneous as was once thought. In highly differentiated societies, moreover, there seems to be a cultural context in which, for example, rules defining separate spheres are held as compulsory, even moral.

By contrast, sociological institutionalism views a world culture of instrumental rationality as analytically prior to differentiation. Differentiation and specialization are not natural solutions to problems. Global rationalism fuels the identification of social problems and the framing of differentiation as a solution. Rationalistic and bureaucratic logics that solve problems and plan change through specialization and expert knowledge work more as rituals and myths. Actors, especially individuals and their associations, have the agency and responsibility to discover problems and to correct them through enactment of these myths. Global rationalism generates greater differentiation.

Luhmann (1982e, 1995a) argues that each function system within world society has its own unique “symbolically generalized medium of communication” with a distinctive code or logic. World society is a system of communication that spans these subsystems. Is the world system of communicative acts associated with a cross-cutting symbol system of generalized media which can be conceptualized as a world culture? Sociological institutionalist theorizing relies heavily on the existence of a common, overarching cultural context, and the more highly rationalized, the greater the differentiation. Emphasizing strongly bounded function systems within a world society heightens the differences with sociological institutionalism. If within Luhmann’s systems theory one explores the idea that world society is not only a system of communication but is also associated with common symbolically generalized media, there is greater possibility of convergence with sociological institutionalism. To call on Marshall McLuhan, the medium (Luhmann) is the message (sociological institutionalism).

Both differentiation and rationalization are important aspects of change, and they reinforce each other. Rationalization thrives in highly differentiated fields and vice versa (cf. Abbott 1988; Thomas *et al.* 2003). The existence of differentiated actors in the absence of a central state is an important condition for the continued dynamism of rationalism: a world state or empire likely would bureaucratically manage and freeze social organization at particular levels of both differentiation and rationalization (cf. Meyer *et al.* 1997). Two different theoretical approaches emphasizing one or the other might be viewed as complementary.

### ***Cultural agency and authority***

Systems theory and sociological institutionalism share a meta-theoretical style of grounding analyses in processes rather than in actors’ intentions and interests, but a central focus of sociological institutionalism is how actors are embedded in and constituted by institutional structures. There is the presumption in systems

theory that differentiated actors take on natural interests and assume agency and authority to act. Sociological institutionalism argues that differentiation is not sufficient to produce agency. Actorhood devolves from rationalized culture (cf. Meyer and Jepperson 2000), and the structure–agency dialectic is an important source of dynamism in modern society (cf. Meyer *et al.* 1997).

This difference is seen in analyses of formal organizations. According to systems theory, an organization is a closed system, strongly bounded from its environment, which nevertheless communicates with its environment. Organizations are said to create themselves by differentiating an inside (the organization) from the outside (the environment) through membership and decision-making processes – they are autopoietic systems (see the chapter by Albert and Hilkermeier). The construction of organizational boundaries and identities is consistent with sociological institutionalism, but in the latter the organization remains constitutively open to processes in its environment. The more systems theory views organizations as strongly bounded and closed and their environments as derivative of their boundary-maintaining strategies, the more it diverges from sociological institutionalism.

Organizations, according to Luhmann, employ “basal codes” and symbolic media of communication peculiar to function systems. The image here is of already existing organizations using codes in their environments. Organizations in the same function system thus will employ the same codes resulting in a degree of isomorphism. Again, this strongly parallels sociological institutionalism, but the difference is that the latter sees the symbolic material in the environment as institutions constitutive of the organization.

An important aspect of actorhood is the authorization to act for the collective, and within world society issues arise over who is authorized to act as an agent of it. If rational-legal authority is invested in territorial nation states, the analytic question is how governance not “contained” neatly within domestic boundaries is to be interpreted (cf. Rosenau and Czempel 1992). Actor authorization is formulated very narrowly in international relations theory. Under the general rubric of governance, the question is posed, when nation states have negotiated an international norm, who is authorized to enforce it or sanction violators? The question, however, is played out in practice by the actors involved and cast as a problem with the institutional order; thus, someone has to do something to correct the system. The very fact that within world society there are claims that something must be done and conflict over who should do it and how documents the existence of a global moral order. Disagreements and conflicts over these claims are intense and moralistic, indicating the conflict is over the application of a moral order.

In these conflicts, different claims as to who and what should be done are grounded in different institutional models of authority and agency. In one model, institutional mechanisms authorize otherwise interest-driven actors to mobilize as an ad hoc agent – a “posse” – to punish a violator. In world society this takes the form of states mobilizing coalitions under the authorization of a United Nations resolution. Under conditions in which a permanent bureaucratic agency to enforce law is absent or “does not go all the way down,” ad hoc

agency is enacted through institutional prescriptions and diffuse moral authority inhering in even interest-driven actors. There are parallels with tribes in a stateless society who come together in short-term collective action to address conflicts or to ceremonially reaffirm the overarching authority.

Under the same conditions, a competing model of agency is when a state or group of states attempts to bring in a rogue state without prior authorization from the UN or another transnational body. This is exemplified in the 2002–2003 debates over the invasion of Iraq. In threatening unilateral action, the USA rhetorically depicts actors as having diffuse moral authority and obligation to stop violators. The use of moralistic categories such as evil plays a prominent role in this discourse. By the model of authorization which sees moral authority as lying primarily in the association of actors, this is viewed as vigilantism and threatens to undermine post-Cold War institution-building which had progressed the furthest in Europe, the location of the sharpest criticisms of unilateralism.

A narrow concern over norms or “second-order” sanctioning thus is a special case of the larger issue of agency in world society. The sociological institutionalist analyzes the culturally constituted nature of the construction of problems and solutions. Global rationalism is characterized by a general process of constructing first problems and then solutions in the form of rational, differentiated formal agency. As already described, individuals are invested with agency both to pursue their own interests and to represent humanity through voluntary associations, resulting in the rational-moral authority of INGOs. Transnational social movements in the form of INGOs, equipped with rational-moral authority and staffed by intellectuals and experts, identify inequalities, norm violations, and social crises. These actors promote themselves as having the solutions to the excesses of self-interested actors, the abuse of power, and inequalities – in short, as having the rational means of attaining peace and justice. This self-described global civil society itself comes under scrutiny following the same rationalizing processes. Its authority is questioned as being elitist and non-democratic. Proposed solutions revolve around rational democratic institutions, again illustrating the process of endogenous change.

World society is emergent, models of authority are contested, and conflict over such issues increasingly is brought to international courts. Through a piecemeal, case-by-case build-up of precedent, a body of rules, models, and procedures becomes acceptable practice. As precedents emanate from courts and protocols from international organizations, and as supranational entities work out rules, additional problems will be identified. The rules, it might be argued, favor a hegemonic power, or the rich, or a particular region. They might indirectly favor official majorities within nation states over minorities. Any such problem would become the basis for poor countries, minorities, activist groups, and INGOs demanding more egalitarian rational-legal rules, possibly winning legal decisions in international courts. Thus, international organization and international law mutually reinforce each other in the face of increased claims to solve problems of world society.

As a corollary to this discussion, rationalization of world authority is historically contingent and generates resistance no matter how gradual, piecemeal, or from the bottom up. Regional or pan-national groups of states might effectively resist or force compromises that buffer them from global hyper-rationalism. Rationalization is not linear, universally homogeneous, nor inexorable. In contrast to differentiation theories, sociological institutionalism underscores historical-cultural contingency; in contrast to actor-centered theories, it underscores the role of rationalistic institutional models.

## **Conclusions**

Institutionalism in sociology conceptualizes the world as a cultural, associational society and thus brings to international relations theory a cultural turn. The worldwide rationalization of social actions of all sorts is built into the practical, formal, and legal rules of everyday life and into the foundational legitimating theories of society. These constitute and give ontological value and agency to actors. Action is largely enactment but this includes the taking on of vested agency. Actors edit and adapt institutions to local contexts even as they embed local practices and identities in broad, universalistic institutions. Sociological institutionalism thus focuses on the processes that connect actor agency to world institutional structures, the extremely high level of agency vested in actors within global rationalism, and the resulting dynamism of world society. This focus is worked out in much empirical evidence that documents how actors such as states organize and appropriate identity, purpose, and lines of action through orientation to general universalistic models.

Exploring sociological institutionalism's similarities and differences with Luhmann's systems theory of world society helps to clarify both theories and put into new focus issues in the study of world society. Both theoretical approaches call for a non-reductionist analysis of world society. Luhmann's conception of a world system of communication that lacks integration is a major point of comparison with sociological institutionalism's understanding of world society and world culture. Both take processes beyond actors as starting points for analyzing world society and both work out processes of change within the one world society. The disagreements are not insignificant, however. Luhmann's systems theory is a theory of society that traces differentiation to systemic processes of communication; sociological institutionalism is an interpretation of rationalization rooted in historical and institutional structures. Sociological institutionalism's relatively greater attention to how actors are constituted out of the rationalization of activity might be more a difference in the research agenda of the two groups of theorists than an intrinsic difference in the theories. There are, however, important differences in their analyses of actors as seen in their treatments of formal organizations.

There are different directions and emphases that each theoretical approach might take that would tend toward convergence or divergence. Much work might occur at the formal theoretical level. By attempting to couch these issues

in the body of empirical work underlying sociological institutionalism I am suggesting that empirical analyses of middle-range issues such as the workings of formal organizations would be especially fruitful for working out non-reductionist interpretations of world society.

## 7 World society from the bottom up

*Lothar Brock*

Theorizing on world society in IR can in large part still be understood as an attempt to challenge political realism. Since realism proceeds from the observation that the international constitutes a political realm *sui generis* it needs neither a theory of the state nor a theory of society. This is the most important source of strength for realism. Unfortunately, it is also a source of weakness for all attacks on realism to the extent that they accept the *sui generis* assumption and try to get by without a theory of the state or of society themselves. On the other hand, to the extent that state and society are changing under the pressure of what for reasons of convenience one may continue to call globalization, theory building on state and society has to live up to the challenge of coping with the global (cf. Walker 1993; Ruggie 1998a, 1998b). So the challenge seems to be clear. While sociologists are confronted with the need for a turn towards the global when reflecting about their object of concern, society, IR has to deepen its “social turn” by reflecting about the social in world society.

Making use of Modern Systems Theory (MST) could contribute to the latter, since it offers a fully fledged theory of world society, thus providing a basis for IR theory building which up to now has been lacking (see the chapter by Albert in this volume). Yet Luhmann’s concept of society is quite special. It claims that there is only one society – world society (cf. Luhmann 1982e). This claim is based on the proposition that society has to be understood as the highest-order social system comprising all communication and that it is communication alone which is regarded as constituting society. In this respect, what we are really talking about is a new understanding of society as such, not a new understanding of change beyond the state. It is, however, precisely this change in which IR theory building on world society is interested. So does the dialogue end before it gets started? In spite of the epistemic distance between MST- and IR-based approaches to world society, they may be of mutual interest after all. MST follows a top-down approach to world society. Like world systems theory it posits the existence of a global totality. Unlike the former it does not focus on crises within and of the system, but on the dynamics of the formation of subsystems and of the way in which these subsystems relate to each other. This is where MST and IR theory building on world society may meet. The latter looks at the formation of new constellations of social forces beyond the state. MST opens up the horizon of change by reaffirming

the possibility of de-coupling society from the nation state. MST distinguishes between functional and territorial differentiation, but treats territorial differentiation largely as a black box. Here IR-based approaches to world society may indeed have something to offer to MST (see the chapter by Albert in this volume). The point of departure of an IR approach to theory building on world society has to be seen in the analysis of inter-state relations. It is interested in how this “inter” changes over time and to what extent such change cumulates and challenges territorial patterns of social reproduction. In this respect, an IR approach to world society works bottom-up. That is to say that while MST is interested in the differentiation of the global system, IR looks at the diversification of relations between its component parts. Thus the bottom-up approach to world society could serve as a way of opening up MST’s black box of territorial differentiation in as much as the black box results from the theory’s top-down orientation.

In what follows I will discuss a bottom-up approach to world society. This implies a focus on world society formation instead of looking at world society as a given social setting (cf. Jung 2001). Theory building on world society formation interacts with real change. That is to say that it does not construct the world *ad libitum*, but only with an audience in mind. This audience comes into existence to the extent that the claims about change seem plausible to others, if only to merit critical objections. In this respect, IR theory building on world society has to be regarded as an integral part of the political struggle over how the world is seen as changing in order to foster (or impede) change. That is to say that while it may be observed by MST as an operation within IR, the latter may also observe MST in this respect.

The present chapter will deal with three issues: the meaning of world society formation, the conceptualization of change, and the interrelationship between society and community formation beyond the state. I proceed on the assumption that a top-down and a bottom-up perspective are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but can help to raise questions which cannot be posed as long as one proceeds on the basis of a more hermetic juxtaposition of these approaches. This is so because even from a bottom-up perspective it makes sense to talk about world society only to the extent that some order is emerging which develops a persistence and dynamic of its own, and thus influences the behavior of actors and the constitution of their interests (cf. Wendt 1999). Even from a top-down perspective subjects cannot be totally eliminated from the scene, or nobody would know about world society as seen by MST (see also Thomas in the present volume on the interconnection between world culture and individual agency). However, the idea of the chapter in the context of the present volume is rather modest. It is not to challenge MST-inspired conceptualizations of global change but rather to offer some ideas for the debate with MST.

### **World society formation as cumulative change**

Throughout history, people have been aware of the existence of a social space larger than that which they themselves have occupied. In this respect, the notion



of a world precedes positive knowledge about the physical limits of the earth. There were “world empires” and “world powers” which either claimed to rule the world or to matter on a world scale (cf. Gollwitzer 1972: 33). Yet when we talk of world society from an IR perspective today, it is not continuity we have in mind but a fundamental change of the *longue durée* type. With regard to modern history, reference to world society has to be seen in the context of the great debate on whether the Westphalian system is here to stay or is in the process of being transcended by some other order (cf. Zacher 1992; Rosenau 1990, 1992a; Ferguson and Mansbach 1996; Krasner 1995). Reference to world society from an IR viewpoint claims that there is a possibility of such a transformation in terms of moving beyond “Westphalia”. In the present chapter, however, I will argue that world society formation had already begun with the *initiation* of the Westphalian order.

“Westphalia” may be regarded as standing for a state-centric order. From this perspective, an IR approach to world society would look for modifications of the international order as an inter-state(s) order in favor of non-state actors and systems of reference. The clearest example of such an approach to world society remains John Burton’s cobweb model. Burton claimed in the early 1970s that a densely woven fabric of social relations “that are world-wide” had emerged (Burton 1972: 19; see also Banks 1984). These social relations constitute a world society which, however, does not unfold freely but is being forced into the Procrustean bed of a state-based order. The states (understood as self-interested bureaucracies) resist social change, thus creating conflict. Since these conflicts spill over from the intra-state to the inter-state level, inter-state conflict has to be understood as social conflict. This implies that state behavior is not determined by anarchy but rather by social relations, and also that international relations cannot be studied adequately by focusing mainly or even exclusively on inter-state relations. As Chris Brown points out (Brown 2001: 229ff; see also his contribution to the present volume), Burton’s concept diverges from the English School on two counts: with a view to the need to analyze inter-state relations in the context of social relations and with a view to the normative critique of state order as such. The latter runs directly counter to the English School’s concept of normative integration at the state level, which is linked not only to the creation of order but also to the realization of the common good either in the form of the globalization of a good order, or the globalization of an order which allows sub-global communities to realize what they perceive as a good order (cf. Brown 2001: 428–429).

The normative bias against a state-based order is clearly rejected in Barry Buzan’s understanding of world society. Buzan has suggested distinguishing international society and world society by focusing on the aspect of normative integration: while international society refers to the emergence of common interests, norms and values among states, world society is constituted by “common norms, rules and identities held by individuals across the system” (Buzan 1993: 339; see also Little 2000). In accordance with Tönnies’ (1979 [1935]) distinction between community (*Gemeinschaft*) and society (*Gesellschaft*),

Buzan views community formation as being driven by affection and resulting, at the global level, in what he calls world society, whereas the same process among states is driven by rational calculations and leads to international society formation (as understood by the English School). Turning the Burtonian perspective upside down, society formation at the state level is not regarded as contradicting or hampering community formation among people. On the contrary, they are complementary, if not symbiotic: “International society provides the political framework without which world society would face all the dangers of primary anarchy. In return, world society provides the *gemeinschaft* foundation without which international society remains stuck at a fairly basic level” (Buzan 1993: 351). Whereas Burton overemphasizes the tension between state-based order and world society, Buzan idealizes the mutually supportive relationship between international (meaning inter-state) society and world society. Is there a safe middle ground?

The World Society Research Group (WSRG), which constituted itself in the 1990s at the universities of Darmstadt and Frankfurt, agrees with Burton (and the English School for that matter) that international relations cannot be analyzed adequately by focusing exclusively or primarily on inter-state relations. Yet it rejects Burton’s clear-cut distinction between the world of states and world society. The WSRG is in agreement with Buzan’s idea that normative integration at the inter-state level and at the trans-state level may be mutually supportive. But it disagrees with the restriction of world society to the transnational (i.e. non-state) level.

While Burton and Buzan in their concepts of world society focus on social relations within and beyond states and claim that world society exists (as a feature of the present world order), the WSRG sees state- and non-state relations more as a continuum. The unfolding of this continuum is at the core of world society formation. World society, therefore, is not seen as given but as emerging. This process is conceptualized as an aggregation of change. It involves economic globalization, the creation of a global public, the expansion of global law and institution-building, and at the same time a reconfiguration of state–society relations. Inter-state arrangements are not superseded by world society. They are rather considered as part of world society formation to the extent that they interact with the dissolution of the territorial congruence of state, economy and society (debordering), and the relative increase in international in comparison to intra-national transactions (denationalization) which are driven by, among other things, technological advances, global sourcing and migration (cf. Albert and Brock 2000; Zürn 1998). Debordering and denationalization in this sense result in an increasing complexity and overlap of lines of inclusion and exclusion (cf. Taylor 1994) and are accompanied by a diversification of actors (state, non-state, hybrid), levels of interaction (sub-state, trans-state, inter-state, regional, global) and units of reference (local communities, cities, states, regions, majorities, minorities, diasporas, civilizations). In sum, world society formation proceeds by way of debordering and denationalization as well as the hybridization of actors (public–private partnerships) and of authority structures (cf. Cutler *et al.* 1999).

Accordingly, world society occurs as cumulative change, in the course of which people learn to recognize each other as members of a social entity that spans the globe. In this respect it signals a secular trend towards lengthening the sequence “kin, tribe, city, state” to include the global (cf. Brown 1995b: 100 ff; see also Görg 2002).

This line of argument can be supported by reference to Max Weber (1968a, b). Weber, unlike Parsons, does not define social relations in terms of the functional requirements of a social system, but rather in terms of subjective acts which rest on an adjustment of interests or the conclusion of agreements on the basis of rational judgement, regardless of whether the latter refers to absolute values or reasons of expediency (cf. World Society Research Group 2000: 6; Weber 1968a, b). Thus society formation proceeds from the bottom up by way of a rationalization of social relations. Accordingly, society formation is not linked in a systematic way to the state. In other words, it can move beyond the state and such movement can be driven by state and non-state actors and by interests which may represent values as well as the calculation of advantages.

World society formation interacts with community formation beyond (or below) the state. Again, following Weber, community formation can be understood as the orientation of social action through a subjective feeling of the parties that they belong together (cf. World Society Research Group 2000: 6). This feeling can be affectual or traditional. Community formation can support the internalization of norms by state and non-state actors. In this sense it would enhance society formation at the state and the trans-state levels. But it may also counteract society formation to the extent that community formation proceeds by way of excluding the other (cf. Brown 1995b: 100–105). I will return to this point later. Stressing the non-deterministic relationship between society formation and community formation beyond the state makes it possible to present a concept of world society formation which allows for a non-linear understanding of change. On the other hand, world society formation began with the inauguration of the Westphalian system. That is to say that there is no threshold at which Westphalia ends and beyond which world society begins. Rather, what we may expect is that world society gets “thicker” as social rule (*Herrschaft*) moves from a state-centric to a less state-centric form. In the following section I will present some thoughts on how the “thickening” of world society can be conceptualized.

### **Cumulative change and the changing logic of world order**

From an MST point of view, world society as a social system is structured by functional differentiation. Differentiation refers to the evolution of subsystems which are characterized by a relatively high density of relations between certain parts of the system in comparison to other parts of the system. This distinction is observed as a boundary between (sub-) system and environment. Apart from functional subsystems of society, there are interaction and organization systems and a variety of systemic levels within and across the subsystems which are

linked by organizations forming “some kind of intermediary system” and capable of communicating directly with each other and of developing a dynamic of their own (cf. Albert 1999: 251; see also Albert and Hilkermeier in this volume). In sharp contrast to the parsimonious concept of international system advocated by structural realism, this image of world society calls for a focus on complexity. This is quite in accordance with a bottom-up IR approach. However, MST conveys the notion that all social relations can be subsumed under the logic of systemic differentiation (see Rossbach in this volume). This way complexity is being streamlined, polished and tamed into making functional sense. A bottom-up approach, in contrast, addresses complexity from the perspective of diversification as a concept which allows us to observe change as an open-ended and possibly chaotic process. Complexity is not seen as representing the functional differentiation of a whole but the deficiencies of living in part(s).

A bottom-up approach would bring to the fore “the diversity entailed in the changing balance of territorial, semi-territorial and nonterritorial elements that increasingly structure struggles in world politics” (Lapid and Kratochwil 1996: 123) without the assurance of a hidden hand that would keep diversification within the bounds of functional differentiation.

This changing balance is difficult to grasp, however, for two reasons. On the one hand, evidence of change, for instance in the form of debordering, denationalization or globalization, seems to be counterbalanced by the uncontested observation that the state, for the time being, remains the central structural feature of social relations. From the perspective of sociological institutionalism as presented by the Stanford School, it is precisely the universalization of the “Westphalian” state as framework of reference for organizing social relations that constitutes the essence of world society formation in the age of globalization (see Thomas in this volume; cf. Meyer *et al.* 1997). Second, there is always the possibility of neutralizing observations of the new by widening the concept of the old in such a way that it can easily accommodate the new as a feature of the old (cf. Krasner 1995).

A bottom-up approach which conceptualizes world society formation as cumulative change implies that social relations beyond the state are getting “thicker” in relative terms, i.e. in comparison to social relations on the local and national level. That is to say that from the beginning of modernity there was global change, in the sense of the existence of a “global horizon” against which social relations unfolded and in the sense of a global interconnectedness of change (cf. Stichweh 2000a: 240). However, the intensity and complexity of the global as it comes to bear on the local have grown considerably since the inauguration of the “world system” some 500 years ago. How can this change be grasped?

Following a moderate constructivism (cf. Adler 1997), I proceed on the assumption that the distinction between international system, international society and world society may be used to distinguish three standards of appropriateness of political behavior depending on how the context in which social struggles unfolds is framed. If we look at the world as an international system

constituted by the interaction of states in the context of anarchy, we would consider it appropriate if political actors pursued a course of defending autonomy (cf. Waltz 1997; Krasner 1995). If we look at the world as an international society constituted by institution-building and collective action derived from the very fact that states constitute each other by way of mutual recognition, then political actors should be driven more by considerations of self-binding than by considerations of autonomy (cf. Bull 1995 [1977]). If we conceive of the world in terms of world society formation characterized by a diversification of actors, levels of interaction and modes of rule (governance), then autonomy and self-binding would have to be projected onto an ever increasing array of subjects which would strive for multiple representation of interests (including, of course ideas about interests). Multiple representation refers to a plurality of actors who define their interests decreasingly in terms of territorial demarcations and increasingly in terms of issue areas relating to substantive or procedural concerns. In this way, change could easily be identified as a change of the relative importance of autonomy, self-binding of states and multiple representations.

If world society formation is viewed as a cumulative process this would imply that the logic of autonomy is present in the self-binding of states as well as in the multiple representations of social relations. Thus the distinction between different logics of appropriateness presented here allows for the observation (made above) that the state is not eliminated from the scene by world society formation and that world society has existed from the very beginning of the modern world order. As to the first point: whether we follow a liberal understanding of state–society relations, which views the two as potential opponents, or a materialist interpretation, which would stress the unity of state and society as a historically specific mode of rule, stateness as such remains an important focus of social struggle regardless of how far world society formation proceeds, though the meaning of stateness has changed considerably over time and continues to do so. This includes the internationalization of the state and the emergence of a “global state” (cf. Shaw 2000) as a complex combination of historical forms of stateness. As to the second point, that world society has existed from the beginning, this would imply that we are not talking of the replacement of the standards of appropriateness of the international system by those of international society and of the latter by those of world society. Rather, one could say that the logic of the international system was from the very beginning embedded in a logic of world society. Change then refers to the shifting importance of the elements of world society over time.

To illustrate the argument it is possible to refer to Kant’s idea of a world civil law (*Weltbürgerrecht*). Kant construed a state of nature (resembling the image of the world as an international system) and developed the argument that it was reasonable to expect the states to move out of this condition. This was to be achieved along two lines of change: democratization and international organization. The latter may conveniently be seen as featuring the logic of self-binding (cf. Brown 2001). The former, democratization, combined the logic of self-binding with domestic change evolving into a mode of rule which was to put

those who suffered the consequences of political decisions in charge of making these decisions. In addition, the new political subjects were to recognize each other as members of a global polity by way of a world civil law. However, Kant also adhered to the logic of autonomy by stating flatly that intervention was to be prohibited because it would violate the right of the population concerned to determine its own road to a reasonable order. Thus Kant provided for multiple representations of social relations on the inter-state and the trans-state levels.

Multiple representation as the operative logic of world society refers not only to a mix of unilateralism, multilateralism and cosmopolitanism. It refers also to a multiplication of the subjects who strive for autonomy or prefer self-binding. Thus as world society formation proceeds, social groups and individuals will increase their striving for autonomy. At the same time, the political bureaucracy may rely more on the self-binding of social actors (voluntary codes of conduct, soft law) than on hierarchical steering. In the same way, to the extent that state autonomy and inter-state mutual security can be viewed as a resource in social struggles, multiple representation would not exclude reference to territorially defined autonomy or inter-state mutual security. Finally, state bureaucracies can react to increasing societal demands by trading inter-state for intra-state autonomy.

A brief glance at history confirms that the different logics of appropriateness do not supersede one another, but are rather being applied unevenly over time and context, and that they may also come to bear simultaneously. At the end of the nineteenth century the symbolization of "One World" through world exhibitions interacted with rampant nationalism, and fledgling international institution-building with an intensifying struggle over how to divide up the world among the "civilized" nations. This struggle culminated in the First World War. In other words, the First World War was fought against the background of a clear understanding of the need to circumscribe the autonomy of the states by provisions for collective action or the standardization of weights, measures and rules on international transport and communication. To take another example: during the hot phase of the Cold War, collective alliance-building in accordance with the logic of the international system marginalized collective security (self-binding) as conceived by the United Nations Charter. During *détente*, mutual security came to the fore as the dominant operative logic without, however, eliminating the drive for autonomy. This became quite obvious during the first Reagan administration in the form of its SDI program.

Going further back in history confirms the assumption that it would be untenable to view change as a linear progression of world order from the international system to international society, to world society. For instance the Westphalian treaties, which may be regarded as the first constitution of modern world order, did recognize the right of each state to fight wars for the very reason that they were sovereign. However, the mutual recognition of the states as sovereign entities constituted a legal order, not a state of nature (as construed by Kant). In this respect, modern international order was from the beginning also an order of the international society type. Though international law was weak and geared

towards the regulation of war, both logics (autonomy and self-binding) were operative in the early Westphalian system. Friedrich Gentz (a student of Kant's) even claimed that there existed, in pre-revolutionary Europe, an aristocratic enlightenment which operated on the understanding that economic interdependence had actually rendered war obsolete (i.e. that the operative logic of self-binding effectively balanced out the operative logic of autonomy). Furthermore, the Treaties of Westphalia not only constituted a system based on the mutual recognition of states as sovereign entities but also provided for rudimentary state-society regulation by stipulating that religious dissenters had to be granted the right to leave the country, a most important issue in view of the principle of *cuius regio eius religio* as the basis on which religious peace was to be secured. In this respect, the logic of world society (as it manifested itself in the "Republic of Europe") was also operative at that time, if only in a rudimentary way. Of course, the Westphalian treaties were confined to re-ordering public affairs in the geographical area which had been the battleground of the Thirty Years War (i.e. the German Holy Roman Empire – which certainly constituted another oddity when considered from the perspective of the international system). But the stipulations of the treaties concerning migration reflected a European sense of legitimacy which had developed in the first half of the sixteenth century. When Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes (1598) in 1685, throwing out the clergy while prohibiting the emigration of the lay Huguenots, he clearly contradicted this consensus. On the other hand, this policy did not halt the undesired movement of people but rather transformed migration into flight and so actually accelerated the movement out of France, bringing considerable advantages to the German states who took in the refugees and allowed them to develop their economic talents.

Thus Steven Krasner (1995) was right when he stated that the Westphalian system was more complex than those who claim that its pillars are crumbling seem to suggest (cf. Zacher 1992). But though there may be little that is genuinely new, a lot is changing with regard to the way in which the logic of autonomy blends with the logic of self-binding and multiple representation. Though the different operative logics underlying social action at the international and global levels have been in place since the beginning of modernity, their relative weight has changed and continues to change. While the formative years of modern world order (from the Religious Peace of Augsburg to the French Revolution) were clearly dominated by the operative logic of the struggle for state autonomy, at a time when the logic of self-binding and of multiple representation remained weak, in the late nineteenth century the operative logic of international society gained in relative importance, and the logic of multiple representation picked up more slowly. It is only recently that it has "caught up".

Since the end of the Cold War, structural changes in the world economy, technological innovation and global migration have brought the operative logic of world society to the fore. Development cooperation, which was instituted in the wake of decolonization, had already signaled this shift. Now there was also the need to deal with the transformation of the former socialist countries. In

general, “global problems” (Seitz 1995) began to be a focus of public concern. Environmental issues especially were taken up eagerly as a testing ground for the move towards a second, reflexive modernity (cf. Beck 1992). As an integral part of this movement, there was a new concern for human rights and conflict prevention as issue areas central to the concerns of the post-Cold War “international community”. While this term in common parlance refers to the members of the United Nations, the (early) 1990s witnessed an influx of non-governmental organizations active in the respective issue areas and sometimes even at the center of formulating the new agendas, providing background information on them, monitoring the execution of policy decisions, and alerting an emerging world public to issue areas which urgently required action. Thus global governance in the form of governance without government became one of the trademarks of the 1990s. As part of these activities, great efforts were made by non-governmental organizations to demilitarize the logic of security by the “securitization” of non-military issues (the environment, poverty, population growth) in an attempt to move these issues up the ladder of High Politics (cf. Buzan *et al.* 1995; Wæver 1995; Jepperson *et al.* 1996). Securitization blended with the demand for market-oriented solutions to problems of world order, which strengthened the transfer of the logic of autonomy and self-binding from the inter-state to the trans-state level. The changing self-description of the liberal state seemed to blend in a perfect way with new concepts of governance without government beyond the state: as the state was to move from hierarchical steering to moderating the interaction of various social groups, there also developed a new interest in unorthodox modes of generating and applying law on the state and non-state levels (WTO regulations on dispute settlement, *lex mercatoria*). There developed a certain tendency to “soften” hard law and to “harden” soft law as law firms interacted with governmental institutions in the process of law making. Most important at the symbolic level at least, the individual was turned into a subject of court decisions across territorial boundaries, which implied that the actions of states were redefined as the actions of people who were held responsible for what they did by external authorities. This development went furthest in the agreement of a sufficient number of countries to establish the International Criminal Court. State bureaucracies are now beginning to adjust to the growing complexity of global economic and sociocultural linkages by retreating, at least in part, from traditional claims to a monopoly in defining public issues, setting agendas and making rules. This implies that the logic of multiple representation is beginning to permeate those institutions which represent the logic of autonomy.

Certainly all this does not imply that the logic of state to state action is being replaced by the logic of trans-state struggles. It “only” implies that the political system of reference under which social struggles proceed has become more complex. As a response, there are movements to reduce complexity by stressing the logic of autonomy. Whereas states were hitherto eager to guard their autonomy in their mutual relations, in the context of world society formation they may now see their autonomy threatened more by social forces than by the



governments of other states. As a result they may be tempted to trade inter-state autonomy for more freedom of action on the domestic front, i.e. to uphold or re-establish their (relative) autonomy *vis-à-vis* their domestic constituency by working out self-binding agreements at the international level, which would then be presented to the publics at home as external givens to which these publics have no choice but to adjust (cf. Wolf 2000). Beyond such maneuvers, there seems to be a certain tendency to respond to the “privatization” of wars (by warlords, organized crime or terrorists) by “nationalizing” counter-measures, for instance by singling out specific countries as global culprits that have to be subdued. Furthermore, while immediately after the end of the Cold War global military spending went down, the trend is now being reversed. This would imply that classic notions of the logic of state autonomy come into play again. Most importantly, there is of course the observation of the Stanford School that globalization goes along with the emergence of a world culture of political representation through nation states, a process which was driven first by decolonization and then by the dissolution of the Soviet empire.

So, once again, there is no straightforward change which would be marked by certain thresholds of the march of history from international system to international society and finally world society. Rather, the operative logic of each of these ideal types of world order is present simultaneously today as it has been all through the history of “Westphalia”. Yet there are sufficient indications that the relative weight of these logics has shifted. To complete and sum up the argument in a rather schematic way: world society formation goes hand in hand with the formation of a world economy. The latter has moved from trade, smuggling, piracy and colonial exploitation via the internationalization of production to global sourcing. The latter is unfolding in connection with an unprecedented acceleration of economic transactions and their relative de-materialization which results from the increasing importance of the tertiary sector. The unfolding of the world market has been matched by the introduction first of functional (World Postal Union) and then of general international organizations (League of Nations, United Nations), as well as by the introduction of a people-centered international law (human rights, international tribunals, establishment of the International Criminal Court) and the diversification of legal forms and procedures (formal and informal law, positive and soft law). Furthermore, the movement of people has gained in importance in as much as classic forms of migration are being replaced by the creation of transnational social spaces linking up and transforming national societies. At the same time, diasporas have acquired a growing importance as a factor determining domestic politics in the countries of migrants’ origins (cf. Brock 1999; *Millennium* 1999). Thus the observation that the complexity of the logic of collective action tends to increase seems well founded.

In sum, in the terms presented above change would refer to a “thickening” of world society in two respects: the diversification of actors, levels of interaction and modes of rule (*Herrschaftsverhältnisse*) on the one hand, and an increasingly complex interplay of different logics of collective action on the

other (cf. Cerny 1995). The latter would add up to the logic of multiple representation. The logic of multiple representation does not “force” governments to act in a certain way. It can rather be seen as a framework of reference for assessing the behavior of governments and other actors. In a formal way, it parallels the argument of structural realism according to which anarchy does not *determine* the behavior of states but only teaches them certain lessons regardless of whether they then follow these precepts or not (cf. Waltz 1979). According to structural realism states learn that refraining from power politics has been to their disadvantage *all through history*, whereas according to the line of argument pursued in this chapter the reduction of the complex logic of world society to power politics is held to “hurt” *increasingly*, and it does so not only in relation to “states” but also in relation to people.

Using an MST approach to world society it could be argued that if there were different logics at work in international relations, one would have to expect them to acquire a life of their own, thus resisting a reflexive interplay. I would go along with this argument to the extent that different organizations (state, non-state) and their subdivisions tend to follow the logic best suited to defend or to strengthen their own position in the overall constellation of social forces. Thus aid bureaucracies are bound to argue that security policy cannot be reduced to the logic of defending autonomy by military means, but rather requires a re-definition of security and of the means by which it can be attained. Likewise, those working with international organizations can be expected to stress the need to follow the imperatives of self-binding. In contrast to an MST perspective on these issues, the present approach continues to posit the existence of a political economy of international relations which not only allows for mutual perturbation between functionally differentiated subsystems or for the (political) steering of the contexts in which economics operate (cf. Willke 1997), but also refers to the way in which social struggles are contained or channeled via the imperative of securing and enhancing social reproduction. Cultural framing plays an important role in this context. It not only serves as an ideological sugaring of the pill but also develops a dynamic of its own resulting in cognitive dissonance when political action ignores the cultural prerequisites of legitimacy.

### **The role of community in world society**

From an MST perspective there is no need to refer to normative integration as an element of society formation. Societies are not seen to presuppose a “we feeling” which in turn necessitates the existence of some other. As Mathias Albert stresses, this constitutes one of the advantages of MST. Other approaches which regard normative integration as essential for society formation fix the latter to “the territorial boundaries of the state, thus leaving the basic model, the ‘territorial trap’, unquestioned” (Albert 1999: 244; cf. Agnew 1994b). MST does indeed avoid this territorial trap. But it does so at a price. MST defines (world) society in terms which, because of their abstractness, are difficult to relate to the concrete history of social struggles. In addition, MST is not unique in offering a

way out of the “territorial trap”. Actually it was political geography, looking at the world with regard to the spatial representations of social relations, which contributed most to problematizing the historical contingency of state, territory and society under the Westphalian world order (cf. Agnew 1994b). Moreover, there seem to be just as many sociological notions of society that do not see the latter tied in an indissoluble way to the nation state as there are conceptions which insist on this linkage (cf. Görg 2002: 292).

Nevertheless, MST raises an important point when it takes issue with the idea of “a normative core of society (usually in the form of a community with a national collective identity)” (Albert 1999: 243; cf. Albert 2002). This point concerns the question, already addressed above, of how society and community formation relate to each other. The distinction between society and community along Weberian lines is helpful in that it allows us to think of society in non-normative terms. But it brings the normative aspects back in when it treats the status of this distinction as one between ideal types. In the “real world”, society and community can be expected to mix routinely. Instead of ignoring this mix it makes more sense to look into the interplay of the formation of society and community. This interplay seems to be quite ambivalent.

In order to grasp this ambivalence it may be helpful to refer to Chris Brown’s distinction between system, society, and community. Brown sees system and community as polar opposites, with society situated in the middle. He understands a system to be a kind of order in which rules and regularities “are the product solely of an interplay of forces and devoid of any kind of normative content” (Brown 2000: 92). A community, in contrast, is “normatively grounded, based on relationships that constitute a network of mutual claims, rights, duties, and obligations that pull people together in ways that are qualitatively different from the impersonal forces that create a system” (Brown 2000: 92). A society is also norm-governed, “but the norms in question emerge out of the requirements for social cooperation and do not necessarily require commitment to any common projects, common interests, or common identity beyond what is required for social coexistence” (Brown 2000: 93; cf. Brown 2001: 427). International society in this juxtaposition may be viewed as inward-looking, like a collective security system. It is geared towards peaceful coexistence or, in the language used above, self-binding. Yet international society can operate as an international community to the extent that it consciously distinguishes itself from others, because this distinction will most likely refer to bonds which go beyond the functional needs of a division of labor. For instance, NATO as an alliance resembles an international community. But it also functions as an international society to the extent that it keeps the peace among its members (cf. Deutsch 1957; Adler and Barnett 1998). How does the self-definition of a group of states as a community impact on international society formation? In 1992, when the UN began to intervene in the break-up of Yugoslavia, NATO offered to work with the UN and even under UN command. This cooperation quickly led to frustrations and NATO began to act on its own. This kind of behavior culminated in the 1999 attack on Serbia without prior Security Council authorization.

While NATO in the beginning contributed to international society formation at the global level, it later challenged the functioning of the UN as an international society.

The break-up of Yugoslavia also involved world society formation in as much as the external response to it modified the classical state-centric approach. First of all, there were quite a few non-governmental or quasi-governmental actors involved. Second, in the case of the war in Bosnia, the UN Security Council defined the gross violation of human rights as a threat to international peace, calling for action under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. Thus the classical claim to state sovereignty was curtailed with a view to the protection of human rights – if necessary by military means (cf. International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty 2001). The same had happened before in relation to the protection of minorities in the case of Iraq (1991), the breakdown of domestic public order in the case of Somalia (1992), and the overturning of election results in the case of Haiti (1994). Third, an international tribunal was set up which held individuals responsible for acts which they committed in official functions during the war. However, the Security Council left it to the member states to decide upon, and to take, appropriate action. At this point, world society formation was challenged because under the prevailing conditions the modification of state-centric rules on non-intervention implied an extension of the right to intervene (by single states or international communities such as NATO). This created a considerable amount of distrust which today threatens to turn the academic observation of a clash of civilizations into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The ambivalence of international communities with regard to world society could theoretically be overcome positively by community formation at the global level (i.e. by the emergence of a “we feeling” of all people as human beings). But can there be such a global community beyond more or less inspiring idealistic phrases? Chris Brown has argued that there “is no good *a priori* reason to deny that within the sequence ‘kin, tribe, city, state’ can be found a widening and deepening of community” (Brown 1995b: 102). On the other hand, however, there is reason to doubt that the sequence can be completed by “world”. This is not simply the case because the mechanistic logic of community formation can only proceed on the basis of an inside–outside distinction. Rather, the reason for the stubborn parochialism of communities is seen by Brown as by Walzer (1983) in the observation that “the most important ‘spheres of justice’ are those which are internal to particular societies rather than cross-cultural in aspiration” (Brown 1995b: 106). In this respect, international society would regulate the relations of “socially just communities” according to the rule of law. From this communitarian viewpoint international society would contain a “world of communities”, but we could not expect the latter to be transformed into a world community which would interact positively with world society formation (cf. Brown 1995b: 105). Pursuing this line of argument, world community formation would smack of hegemony and such a hegemony could provoke the formation of antagonistic communities pursuing militant politics of identity, thus challenging the very existence of international society.

Can world society formation proceed without the support of world community formation? As ideal types, modern societies are based on rational calculations converging around the idea of institutionalizing a division of labor in order to secure and enhance social reproduction. However, as historical phenomena, modern societies have formed in an interplay with community formation in the form of nation building. Thus, the expectation in modern societies that the rational calculations of all members will converge around the expectation of functional cooperation was stabilized by the emergence of a “we feeling”. Since we are dealing here with a historical contingency, this does not lead to the conclusion that society formation at the global level can come about only as some replica of “classical” society formation. It does suggest, however, that world society formation involves symbolic integration (understood as the emergence of symbolic means of orientation beyond the state). Though the latter must not necessarily be seen as a constitutive function of society formation (as suggested by Jung 2001: 452), it has to be seen as an asset of society formation with a view to the need to organize social reproduction in the context of the various historical experiences and cultural traditions, and, last but by no means least, in the context of uneven development.

In this sense, world society formation involves the internalization of universal norms as identical points of reference in widely differing contexts. In contrast to the normative integration of a society which focuses on shared beliefs and values as such, symbolic integration through norms concerns the question of to what extent there are norms to which all actors around the world refer, without (1) necessarily agreeing on the meaning of these norms in the various settings in which these actors operate, and (2) hollowing out the symbolic function of such norms by the apparent lack of consensus with regard to the application of the norms (cf. Bonaecker and Brodocz 2001). In this regard human rights play a central role. Human rights, however, may not only function as a medium of symbolic integration. They may also be regarded as a crucial contribution to constitution-building beyond the state. Symbolic integration through human rights norms would provide a space for addressing grievances at the local level. The essence of constitution-building at the global level would be to defend such a space against public or private encroachments. In this sense world society formation not only provides a larger container for social relations, but is beginning to push the re-organization of rule in the form of complex forms of stateness beyond the state onto the agenda of world politics (cf. Shaw 2000).

## **Conclusion**

The approach to world society outlined in this chapter conceptualizes change in a way that avoids the inconclusiveness which characterizes much of the IR debate on whether there is anything new under the sun or not. It addresses world society formation as an ongoing process, rather than a state of world order which can be reached beyond a certain threshold. Thus world society formation is understood as a macrohistorical process which involves an increasing

complexity of the frame of reference within which social struggles unfold in the world arena. In order to grasp this increasing complexity, the chapter has distinguished three ideal type conceptualizations of world order with a specific logic of appropriateness pertaining to each of them (autonomy, self-binding, and mutual representation). In this way, world society formation implies that the logic of autonomy (linked to the concept of international system) and the logic of self-binding (pertaining to the concept of international society) are increasingly being combined by state actors; and that sub-state and non-state actors are gaining in importance on the global level as subjects of these logics. Thus social formations (including cities, diasporas and multinational companies) are striving for autonomy and also engaging in self-binding on a functional (non-territorial) basis, making use of, interacting with, or confronting, the territorial policies of state-based actors.

Unlike Wendt (1999), who stresses the difference between a Hobbesian, a Grotian and a Kantian concept of world order, the present distinction has to be understood as addressing the linkages between different conceptions of world order as three sides of a single coin, i.e. of the challenge to secure social reproduction in a political setting characterized by the existence of formal hierarchical authority structures in a milieu shaped by the absence of such structures. World society formation, accordingly, proceeds as the striving for autonomy and simultaneous self-binding in the context of increasingly polymorphic representations of interests and ideas in the form of inter-state politics, sub-national and transnational cooperation, public–private partnerships, the privatization of authority and the “authorization” of private regulation, the reshaping of public space and the redefinition of the border between the private and the public, etc. These polymorphic (multiple) representations do not exclude the kind of isomorphism which the Stanford School identifies as the essence of world society. But in contrast to the Stanford School, the observation of such polymorphism as understood in the present chapter not only concedes that there is a high level of individual agency that cannot directly be traced to world institutional structures (see Thomas in the present volume), but also turns the perspective around and traces the formation of world institutional structures back to the change of patterns of rule in the context of uneven development (at the global level). Thus the top-down approach of institutional sociology is matched by a bottom-up approach which gives more room to an agent-based diversification of social relations. In this way, the bottom-up approach should be seen as balancing the top-down approach of the Stanford School instead of contradicting it.

Something like this can also be said of the relationship of the present approach to MST. The top-down approach of MST posits the differentiation of a given totality. The bottom-up approach presented here emphasizes the breaking-up of established social patterns (usually referred to as the Westphalian world order). It focuses precisely on what is left by MST as an arcane sphere in an overall process of functional differentiation: the spatial structuration of social relations. The study of world society from the perspective of increasingly diverse forms of representation of interests and ideas in a global arena makes it possible to look more closely

at how territorial patterns of representation are being modified by the reconstruction of social space along non-territorial lines. Furthermore, whereas MST observes how things are moving apart (in the form of functional differentiation), the present bottom-up approach is directed towards the question of how things grow together, not only in the form of increasing interdependence and inter-penetration of national societies but also in the form of symbolic integration. Again, these perspectives are not mutually exclusive but may even be complementary. On the other hand, the two approaches follow a radically different notion of society and use different languages. According to MST thinking, what we may expect are not elegant translations from one into the other but mutual provocations. If that suffices to keep the debate on world society going, there is no reason to be unhappy about communication problems in a society constituted by communication but *not* by communication alone.

## 8 World society, systems theory and the classical sociology of modernity

*Dietrich Jung*

### **Introduction: society and world society<sup>1</sup>**

We're not just individuals, we're part of a larger whole and we must constantly have regard for that larger whole, we're dependent on it, beyond doubt. ... But wherever men live together, something has been established that's just there, and it's a code we've become accustomed to judging everything by, ourselves as well as others. And going against it is unacceptable; society despises you for it, and in the end you despise yourself, you can't bear it any longer and put a gun to your head.

(Quoted in Theodor Fontane (1995) *Effi Briest*, trans. Hugh Rorrison and Helen Chambers, London: Angel Books, p. 177)

With these words Geert von Innstetten justified the duel in which he killed Major Crampas, the man who had had an affair with his wife more than six years previously. Although the discovery of the affair moved him, Innstetten did not feel so offended and outraged that he had to challenge Crampas. Rationally, he considered the duel as neither in his interest nor to his satisfaction. It was the moral codex of Prussia's aristocratic society that demanded his action and made the duel inevitable. In his novel *Effi Briest*, Theodor Fontane wrote a dedicated critique of late nineteenth-century Prussian society, revealing the contradictions of a time in which the dynamics of modernization were still confronted with remnants of Europe's traditional societies. With its exaggerated concept of honor, the European aristocracy reacted to this fundamental societal transformation that Niklas Luhmann described as the shift in society's primary structuration from stratification to functional differentiation (cf. Luhmann 1997a: 733–739). Yet, Innstetten's words express more than the contradictions of a modernizing society. In a more abstract sense he made two important assumptions about the very nature of society. In the first place, there is the notion of society as a larger whole, as an integrated structure that is more than the sum of its elements. Second, Innstetten underlines the moral quality of society, the concept of society as a normative order.

Taking up these assumptions, this chapter aims to sketch out a conception of world society that is theoretically rooted in *classical theories of modernity*. Thereby, it interprets the modernizing process as the evolution of an encompassing societal



system that consequently establishes modern society as world society. Despite all the differences between classical sociology and Modern Systems Theory, I will argue that Luhmann's proposition that "it is no longer sensible to speak of 'modern societies' in the plural" (Luhmann 1990d: 178) was already an inherent part of classical sociology.<sup>2</sup> Having Innstetten's assumptions in mind, my argument is guided by the following set of questions: How can we understand world society as a larger whole, as a global social order that transcends the state-centered structure of the international system? What are the dynamics and characteristics of an emergent world society? Can we conceive world society also as a moral order? And if we do so, who are the actors relevant for the constitution and maintenance of those normative structures?

In approaching these questions from a sociological perspective, this chapter joins the ongoing discussion about changing features of world politics as partly documented in this book. In particular the chapters in this part of the volume point at a number of conjunctures that can stir a fruitful interdisciplinary discussion. All these chapters view society as a larger whole. They conceptualize world society as an emerging global societal structure that enjoys certain autonomy and that is not reducible to elements such as individuals, states or other collective actors. In addition they address normative aspects of society, either understanding world society as a normative order or investigating the conditions of universal norms.

Given those commonalities, the concepts of Brock, Brown and Thomas share an affinity for the corpus of classical theories of modernity. However, they tend to neglect the paradigmatic difference between tradition and modernity that forms an essential part of early sociology and that is still relevant for a sound understanding of the historical patterns of an emerging world society.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, this chapter presents a theoretical frame of reference that is partly based on this dichotomy between tradition and modernity, drawing from patterns of global change as perceived by classical authors such as Tocqueville, Marx, Weber and Elias. This classical corpus will be supplemented with Habermas' paradigm of system and lifeworld, combining functionalist theory with agency. Then a brief discussion about the novelty of "reflexive modernity" follows. The conclusion will discuss some political and normative aspects of global change, particularly with regard to other chapters of this section.

### **Modernization and world society: a classical view**

In 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville described in his introduction to *Democracy in America* a fundamental social process that he called the great democratic revolution:

Wherever we look, we perceive the same revolution going on throughout the Christian world. The various occurrences of national existence have everywhere turned to the advantage of democracy: all men have aided it by their exertions, both those who have intentionally labored in its cause and those

who have served it unwittingly; those who have fought for it and even those who have declared themselves its opponents have all been driven along in the same direction, have all labored to one end; some unknowingly and some despite themselves, all have been blind instruments in the hands of God.

(Tocqueville 1961 [1835]: 6)

Tocqueville analyzes a powerful structural development that seems to be independent of individual motivations. Theoretically, he explains this transformation by the fact that “the different relations of men with one another became more complicated and numerous as society gradually became more stable and civilized” (Tocqueville 1961 [1835]: 4). In the center of this democratic revolution, Tocqueville locates a gradual development of principal equality, a form of social organization that increasingly shapes social relationships in a similar way. In normative terms, however, he was aware of the double-edged nature of modernity and concluded: “I have not even pretended to judge whether the social revolution, which I believe to be irresistible, is advantageous or prejudicial to mankind” (Tocqueville 1961 [1835]: 15).

One hundred years later, Norbert Elias focused on the same social development. The rapid increase in the complexity and number of social relations that connect individuals and groups in imperceptible chains of dependence forms the structural core of his *Civilizing Process*. Unlike Tocqueville, Elias did not perceive this revolutionary development as a result of God’s providential care. Instead of using religious terms of the absolute, he refers to the abstract rationale of an unplanned, long-term social process in which societal structures are shaped and sustained by the unintended outcomes of the intended acts of social actors (cf. Elias 1997).

The civilizing process, seen from the aspects of standards of conduct and drive control, is the same trend which, when seen from the point of view of human relationships, appears as the process of advancing integration, increased differentiation of social functions and interdependence, and the formation of ever-larger units of integration on whose fortunes and movements the individual depends, whether he knows it or not.

(Elias 1994: 332)

In his socio- and psychogenetical studies Elias distinguishes between two different but interrelated aspects of Tocqueville’s democratic revolution. On the one hand, he examines the macro-sociological dimension of this process in the formation of the modern nation state and its fundamental monopolies on physical force and taxation. On the other hand, Elias investigates the micro-sociological aspects of this social revolution that he locates in a peculiar molding of the human drive economy and in the advancement of shame and embarrassment thresholds. Elias defines the immanent link between the macro and the micro level as the conversion of outer constraints into self-restraints.

Consequently, the growth of social complexity and dependency is reflected in a more differentiated and stabilized self-control of the individual (cf. Elias 1994: 443f). The civilizing process is therefore a transformation of both forms of social organizations and modes of individual behavior; a principally global development leading to a highly differentiated social control of physical force and, combined with this macro-sociological process, to a more and more refined formation of individual consciousness and social conduct (cf. Elias 1994: 164).

Whereas Norbert Elias concentrated on the formation of the modern state and changes in the social fabric of modern individuals, Karl Marx's work centers on the economic conditions of global change. For Marx, the dynamics of the *Great Transformation* (Polanyi) is related to the introduction of "larger-scale industry," which universalized competition. The universal character of economic competition gradually resolves all "natural" traditional relations into abstract money relations:

It destroyed as far as possible ideology, religion, morality, etc., and, where it could not do this, made them into a palpable lie. It produced world history for the first time, insofar as it made all civilized nations and every individual member of them dependent for the satisfaction of their wants on the whole world, thus destroying the former natural exclusiveness of separate nations.

(Marx and Engels 1976 [1845]: 73)

Theoretically, the heuristic model of consociation (*Vergesellschaftung*) through value relations guides Marx' explanation of this global transformation. Based on the contradiction between use value and exchange value, he constructs ideal types of value forms that serve as analytical instruments to explain social change. Beginning with real barter exchange, this metamorphosis of value forms leads – through the transformation of use values and labor into commodities and commodities into money – to the establishment of capitalism. In structural terms, the abstract ideal type of the market, then, represents the dominant social relationship of capitalist society. The global tendency of capitalist consociation, historically observable in the emergence of the world market, is due to the dynamics that result from the immanent contradiction between the value forms and their absolution in money:

As money develops into world money, so the commodity owner becomes a cosmopolitan. The cosmopolitan relations of men to one another originally comprise only their relations as commodity owners. Commodities as such are indifferent to all religious, political, national and linguistic barriers. Their universal language is price and their common bond is money.

(Marx 1976 [1859]: 384)

Looked at from a historical perspective, the exchange of commodities begins first precisely where traditional social communities end, "on the boundaries of such communities, at their points of contact with other similar communities, or with

members of the latter” (Marx 1976 [1867]: 98). From there onwards, market structures enter traditional communities and start to dissolve their social fabric. They replace personal worth, the social capital of traditional relationships, by exchange value, making the abstract value itself to the structural principle of a global integration process and chasing their principle social actor, the bourgeoisie, “over the whole surface of the globe” (Marx and Engels 1976 [1848]: 487).

In *The Market: Its Impersonality and Ethic*, Max Weber makes the same point in determining “consociation through exchange in the market” (Weber 1968b: 635) as the archetype of all rational social action. He defines the structural particularity of the rationalization process, the disenchantment of the world through the principle of formal rationality, as the rational and bureaucratic organization of all kinds of human systems of domination, such as factories, armies and states. Formal rationality in its bureaucratic forms is based on the principles of the division of labor, functional specification and expert training. The universal application of those principles, the global triumph of formal rationality, is the main topic of Max Weber. Tocqueville’s democratic revolution, Elias’ civilizing process and Marx’s self-expanding value reappear in Weber’s work as the advancement of formal rationality, meaning the radical formalization and de-personalization of social relationships on a global scale (cf. Weber 1991a [1918]: 329ff).

Similar to Marx, Weber located his archetype of modern society, the market, at the frontiers of traditional communities, as “a relationship which transcends the boundaries of neighborhood, kinship group, or tribe” (Weber 1968b: 637). While Marx put the economic unit, the value form of commodities, at the center of his analysis of modern society, Weber focused on human ideas and actions. He got to the heart of the global transformation in analyzing the process of rationalization and its formal principle of calculability:

The increasing intellectualization and rationalization do not, therefore, indicate an increased and general knowledge of the conditions under which one lives. It means something else, namely, the knowledge or belief but if one but wished one could learn it at any time. Hence, it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanting. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculations perform the service. This above all is what intellectualization means.

(Weber 1991b [1919]: 139)

Both Max Weber and Georg Simmel associate this formal, abstract and calculable character of modern society to the universalization of the money mechanism. While Weber stresses the affinity between the functional and abstract character of money with social orders based on instrumental rationality

(*Zweckrationalität*), Simmel points at the interrelation of monetization and individualization. He defines money as an impersonal social institution that links and divides people at the same time, causing the atomization of individuals (cf. Simmel 1990). The principle of calculability, the non-ethical structure of market relations, and their consequences on the conduct of modern human life were central problems of Simmel's and Weber's sociological enquiry.

While Weber and Simmel struggled with the formal, non-ethical and abstract character of modern social relations, Modern Systems Theory came to terms with the autonomous laws of a functionally differentiated society. It substituted the traditional question about the relationship between society and individual, between the whole and its elements, with the differentiation between system and environment. In this concept the individual appears only as a psychological system in the environment of social systems, as an "individualized collage of expectations" (Luhmann 1984a: 429). Modernization is then explained in evolutionary terms of structural change in which the principle of functional differentiation replaces traditional social forms based on segmentation or stratification (Luhmann 1981d: 187). Thus, the global spread of functional differentiation characterizes the rise of modernity, constructing society as a communicative whole that is internally divided by autonomous subsystems such as economy, politics, religion, science and law.

There is no doubt that all these authors deal with a historical process in which we can observe the emergence of a global social whole. They describe the modernization process as a dramatic increase in the density, complexity, and differentiation of social relations. Thereby, formal and abstract patterns of consociation gradually replace the direct and personal social relations on which traditional forms of societal organization rest. In its macro-sociological dimension modernization leads to world society, represented by abstract macro-structures such as the capitalist world-market, the international system of states, international law and the global scientific community. Its micro-sociological dimension is visible in the specific societal and cultural changes of everyday life that are associated with the concept of individualization. In comparison to the social boundedness of the community-defined subjects of traditional worlds, modern individuals seem to have lost their ties to the social world. In Luhmann's terminology they represent psychological systems for which the communications of a functionally differentiated social world are only perceptible as environmental "noise." In sum, *classical sociology* can offer a conceptual frame of reference for a pluralistic theory of world society without necessarily giving political, economic, cultural or societal aspects of modernity a determining quality in the modernization process as a whole. In addition, it opens avenues to research global change on different levels of analysis, thus bridging the analytical and disciplinary divides between international system, state and individual.

In conceptual terms, the paradigmatic difference between tradition and modernity is based on two ideal types of society. They are ideal not in an evaluative sense, but as logically precise and static constructions for analytical and explanatory purposes. As heuristic tools, they are general concepts applied to

understand empirical instances that never correspond exactly to them. The historical evolution of world society appears then as an uneven long-term process, as the disparate and non-simultaneous spread of political, economic and cultural features of modernity. A process that generates a multitude of increasingly interdependent empirical formations in which we can discern patterns of both ideal types: of traditional and of modern society. Accordingly, world society as an emerging but still fragmented whole displays a high degree of structural heterogeneity. In the words of Ernst Bloch, it is characterized by the “contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous” (Bloch 1985), by the fact that modernization structures it as an uneven societal patchwork in which traditional and modern elements coexist.

Turning to world society as a moral order, however, classical sociology presents a more ambiguous picture. On the one hand, Luhmann’s concept of autopoiesis, of the autonomous self-perpetuation of social systems, can be interpreted as the consequent absolution of the self-referential character of modernity that previously could be discerned in Marx’s theorem of the self-expanding value, in Weber’s struggle with the non-ethical character of formal rationality, or in Elias’ idea of an unplanned social process. In this sense, already in the works of these classical authors world society appears first and foremost as a functional mechanism of social reproduction and not as a socially accepted moral order. On the other hand, none of the classical authors went as far as Luhmann, who eliminated the ideas of social integration and of general representation from his concept of society. While in Luhmann’s concept the social whole is characterized by difference, by the delegation of social functions to operationally closed subsystems, the classics have a tendency to identify the whole with either of its economic, political or cultural parts. Moreover, they had not yet given up viewing the social world in normative and moral terms. From the perspective of Modern Systems Theory, world society has no moral quality. In the light of classical sociology, however, the question about the normative aspects of world society might be raised. In order to answer this question the differentiation between tradition and modernity will be accomplished by the paradigmatic distinction between social and functional integration (cf. Lockwood 1969).

### **Uneven developments and contradictions in the evolution of world society**

The modernizing process resolves the natural unity of traditional forms of social reproduction. It destroys the basic nature of community (*Gemeinschaft*), and establishes society (*Gesellschaft*) as a functionally subdivided and principally unlimited form of social reproduction (cf. Tönnies 1979 [1935]). The crossing of geographical, political, social and cultural borders is thus inherent to modernization. Historically, this process appears first as the painful destruction of traditional forms of life and not as the establishment of a new social order. Observable in processes of monetarization and bureaucratization, functional

integration, i.e. the coordination of consequences of action by abstract media, replaces social integration, i.e. the coordination of orientations of action by norms and values. Hence, the formation of world society can first be understood as the gradual transformation from social integration to system integration, as the conflict-prone separation processes of lifeworld and function systems.

The uncoupling of system and lifeworld takes place via generalized media of action, which appear first in the economic and political realms. Coordinated by money and power, the economic and political systems evolve as formal complexes of action apart from lifeworld. There, these functional mechanisms, in which differentiation turns into a synonym for forced integration, only slowly and indirectly become institutionalized: money, via private law, and power, via the public-legal organization of offices (cf. Habermas 1986: 270). Legally anchored in lifeworld in this way, the formally rationalized complexes of economic and administrative action induce the rationalization of lifeworld, making symbolic reproduction more abstract, differentiated and reflexive:

The further the structural components of the lifeworld and the processes that contribute to maintaining them get differentiated, the more interaction contexts come under conditions of rationally motivated mutual understanding, that is, of consensus formation that rests *in the end* on the authority of the better argument.

(Habermas 1986: 145)

In the historical course of the modernizing process, the rationalization of lifeworld and thus of symbolic reproduction seems to be at least temporarily subordinated to the functional integration of the economic and political realms. Social integration via the “authority of the better argument” is – if possible at all – only a late result of reflected functional interdependencies. Therefore, the establishment of a modern normative order depends on the re-coupling of systems and lifeworld.

Looked at from an agency perspective, the economic and political penetration of lifeworld creates two spheres of public and private action. In Weber’s reading these spheres correspond to two types of social action that are defined according to their orientations. The first type, instrumental rationality (*Zweckrationalität*) is oriented towards the successful attainment of ends, viewing action as a rational calculation of ends, means and secondary results. In the second type, value rationality (*Wertrationalität*), consciously followed norms and values motivate action. The actor acts according to normative imperatives, irrespective of prospects of success. Although instrumental rationality is considered to be the dominant type of action in modern society, it would be a mistake to equate instrumental with formal rationality as such. What marks the difference is the fact that in contrast to instrumental rationality the formalization of values and norms is only a late product of modernization (cf. Weber 1968a: 24ff).

Theoretically, this temporal disparity of the development of the two types of action is related to a qualitative difference in the generalization of the economic

and the political realms. In contrast to the economic medium money, the generalization of political power needs a specific source of confidence, legitimacy, and therefore a consensus that depends on the communicative functions of language and cultural symbols (cf. Habermas 1986: 270). In other words, the political system is inseparably linked to the symbolic reproduction of lifeworld.

In the logic of conceptual ideal types, the symbolic order on which political authority in modern society rests is structured around principles of formal rationality. In Weber's terms, "legal [rational] authority is resting on a belief in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands" (Weber 1968a: 215). Unlike traditional rule, which is based on personal authority and the obedience of age-old rules, legal systems of authority rest on an impersonal purpose and the obedience of abstract norms. The same ideal distinction applies now to traditional and modern symbolic orders, as well as to their respective types of value rationality. While the norms and values of traditional societies are perceived as sanctified and invariable, the norms and values of modern society are deliberately produced human artifacts.

From a historical perspective, however, the rise of modern states has not displayed a linear transition from traditional to legal forms of authority. In sharp contrast to those ideal types of legitimate rule, emerging political systems incorporated religious symbols and based their legitimacy on the symbolic order of lifeworlds that were still rather traditional in nature. Therefore the establishment of legal authority was itself communicated through traditional symbols and had to rely on traditional mechanisms of social integration. Habermas follows this complex interrelation between modern state formation and the evolution of symbolic orders that are based on the principles of formal rationality along processes of juridification. These are defined by the expansion and the increasing density of formal written law, which accompanied different phases – absolutism, constitutional monarchies, democracy, welfare state – of modern state building.

Similar to Elias, Habermas relates the micro-sociological aspects of a rationalized lifeworld to the formation of functionally integrated macro-structures. The evolution of forms of action according to instrumental rationality or formal value rationality are therefore inseparably tied together with the formation of abstract economic and political systems. But these processes are theoretically and historically far from being linear. Habermas stresses two crucial aspects of this unevenness of modernization. First, he explains that in modern society, logically and temporarily, functional integration precedes social integration, entailing a chronic deficit of political legitimacy. Second, Habermas points at different speeds in the development of economic, political and cultural systems, as well as in the evolution of instrumental rationality and formalized value rationality. In terms of agency, Innstetten's compliance to the traditional norms of Prussia's aristocracy is a good case in point. His decision to conduct the duel in spite of its irrational ends developed in the area of conflicting modern and traditional types of action.

From this perspective, the emergence of world society as a social whole has its origins in the dynamics of growing functional interrelations on a global scale.



It is this primacy of functional integration and its mode of operational closure that have found absolution in Luhmann's concept of autopoiesis. In particular the material reproduction of mankind is increasingly dependent on an economic world system whose functional totality replaces any kind of lifeworld-related material reproduction. Therefore it comes as no surprise that globalization is basically perceived in economic terms, as internationalization of production, distribution and consumption, i.e., as the inevitable incorporation of local and national economies into a capitalist world economy (cf. Holsti 1995: 10; Rosenau 1992b: 281). Yet while the self-reference of material reproduction, mediated by money, forges individuals and groups together in a global economic dependency, the political domain with its core monopoly of physical force is to a large extent still organized according to the territorial limitations of the Westphalian state system.

This uneven character of the economic and political macro-structures of world society is related to the fact that the political system and thus power relations require legitimacy. In its economic dimension world society establishes indirect social relations that are almost free of further justifications. Political authority, however, continues to rest on inner justifications that both ruler and ruled consider as legitimate. Whereas the abstract function of money easily overcomes territorial and cultural limitations, legitimacy relates political power inseparably to the symbolic micro-structures of lifeworld. Empirically, most symbolic orders are more or less still molded with traditional norms and values and the intrinsic link between political system and lifeworld displays the crucial dichotomy of tradition and modernity. It is this heterogeneity of symbolic orders that has been discussed under concepts such as "invented tradition" or "imagined communities." On a global scale, the necessary reflection of functional constraints in rationalized lifeworlds is hardly visible. The development of world society as a moral order is therefore closely linked to the emergence of lifeworlds whose symbolic orders reflect the principles of formal value rationality.

Theoretically structured along the two paradigms tradition/modernity and social/functional integration, world society resembles empirically a patchwork of contradicting societal elements in which processes of fragmentation and universalization can be observed at the same time. The logical and temporal hierarchy of the different realms of social reproduction is reflected in the spatial levels of a global economy, a national political order and local cultures. Globalization appears as economic integration versus cultural fragmentation, leaving the nation state in between. As a means of political organization, both global economic imperatives and the necessary linkage between politics and local lifeworlds tear the contemporary state.

## **Second or reflexive modernity**

Intrinsic contradictions of modernity add a further layer to this complex picture of world society. According to Ulrich Beck, these contradictions can be understood with the concept of reflexive modernity. This stands for the self-

confrontation between foundations and consequences of modern society, for the diagnosis that “industrial modernization is undermining industrial modernization” (Beck 1997: 5). With this concept, Beck intends to oppose the simplistic construction of modernity as a linear process of rationalization and proposes the advent of a “second modernity.” While linear industrial progress, functional differentiation, and instrumental rationality govern simple modernity, self-dissolution, self-endangerment and a search for global coordination characterize second or reflexive modernity.

Beck associates reflexive modernity with “risk society.” In itself a “consequence of modernity” (cf. Beck 1986; Giddens 1990), risk society replaces the logic of wealth production with the logic of risk production that transcends social and national boundaries (Beck 1986: 17 ff). As consequences of industrial society, ecological and chemical risks, as well as the unintended results of genetic engineering, contradict the crucial principle of formal rationality, its claim of calculability (cf. Beck 1993: 40f). Given the global dimension of these risks, risk society is by definition an aspect of world society. But do the concepts of reflexive modernity and risk society make the analytical instruments of classical sociology obsolete?

In relying on classical sociology as a conceptual reservoir, the concept of world society presented is a long way from giving a linear explanation of modernization. If there is an aspect of linearity, then this is of a pure methodological nature. The analytical application of ideal types, however, does not predict historical processes. The theoretical dichotomy of tradition and modernity is only a heuristic tool to explain the heterogeneous social structures that historically characterize the advancement of modernity. Thus, the linear notion of modernization is the result of a confusion of analytical instruments with reality rather than a characteristic of classical theories. Applying the concept of the contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous, classical sociology is quite well able to disclose the symbiotic character of industrial society as a historical face of modernity. In this regard the concept of reflexive modernity certainly does not abrogate classical theory.

In sharp contrast to their pretensions, Beck and Giddens confirm the classical notion of modernization as an unplanned social process that is self-referential and unlimited in character. In particular the concept of risk society emphasizes this all-encompassing nature of world society. It further strengthens the argument for viewing the emergence of a global social whole, whether as world market or as a global community of shared and self-imposed threats. In underlining the ambiguity of this global transformation, that it shows both destructive and constructive results at the same time, reflexive modernity only echoes the critical and rather pessimistic views of some of the classical authors such as Tocqueville, Marx or Weber. In Luhmann’s words, the concept of risk society only utilizes a particular historical difference, declaring a “single spectacular phenomenon to a representative of the whole” (Luhmann 1997a: 1089).

The contribution of reflexive modernity to the discussion about the normative and moral qualities of world society is limited to two aspects. First, the

concept of risk society makes the irrational aspects of instrumental rationality transparent again. In applying formal rational standards, it proves that instrumental rationality in its systemic consequences contradicts its own principle of calculability. This immanent criticism of modern rational standards is in line with previous skeptical stands toward modernity, in particular with the argument in Weber's *Science as Vocation*, that culminated in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Adorno and Horkheimer). This disenchantment with modernity enhances the deficit of legitimacy that characterizes the political realm of modernizing society. Yet this time the deficit of legitimacy is not caused by the constraints of traditional worldviews, but by the consequences of instrumental rationality itself. Evidently, empirical political systems have to balance the contradictions produced by both "simple" and "reflexive" modernity.

Second, contrary to Modern Systems Theory the proponents of reflexive modernity maintain that there are ways out of these modern contradictions. Anthony Giddens, for example, suggests a utopian realism based on "life politics" that counteracts the disintegrative aspects of globalization and includes new mechanisms of re-embedding in modern lifeworlds (cf. Giddens 1990: 154). Beck takes up this point of "life politics" and calls for a "reinvention of politics" in which ecological and technological questions abolish "the neutrality and objective apoliticism of the economic sphere" (Beck 1997: 160). In this way both authors interpret globally shared risks as just another aspect of the functional penetration of lifeworld. In becoming reflexive, this mutual threat perception does not only endanger the modern project, but might also offer possibilities for the rationalization of lifeworld and therefore for the evolution of a global moral order based on the formal authority of the better argument.<sup>4</sup>

### **Conclusions: relocating politics in world society**

The purpose of this chapter has been to sketch out a concept of world society from a sociological point of view. Rooted in classical theories of modernity, it constructs world society as a social totality, as a social whole, which is differentiated analytically into realms of economic, political and symbolic/cultural reproduction. In sharp contrast to this theoretically constructed totality, world society as an empirical phenomenon is viewed as a long-term social process that is neither diffuse nor teleological in its nature. The possibility of systematizing global change in retrospect, whether as socio-cultural evolution or as a process with specific directions, does not revoke the principal contingency of history. In order to grasp the emergence of world society, two analytical dichotomies have been introduced that help to structure these transformations from traditional to modern societies, from the dominance of social to the dominance of functional integration.

This concluding section now rejoins the discussion briefly mentioned in the beginning. How is this complex concept of world society to be linked to the major questions of international politics? What is the contribution of this sociological view to the ongoing debate about world society? In giving some tentative

answers, these concluding remarks focus on two issue complexes: on the role of state and non-state actors in world society and on normative aspects of global politics.

In contrast to Burtonian theories of world society, Chris Brown assigns the nation state a major role in both the peaceful mediation of conflicts and the creation of an international political order. He defines the difference between the English School and structural realism precisely along normative aspects of international relations. While in the realist international system states are mere utility maximizers, international society is norm-governed and promotes a kind of rational political order above state level. In sociological terms, Brown defines international society according to value rational action and rejects the almost exclusive role of instrumental rationality in structural realism. But this does not lead him to abandon principles of realism. He maintains a state-centered perspective and perceives “world society” not as a social totality, but as an association of states that agrees on some shared regularities such as non-intervention, peaceful means and justice (cf. Brown 2001; see also his chapter in this volume).

In focussing on state actors and normative structures, his approach is certainly different from the encompassing perspective of this chapter. But the theoretical divide is not unbridgeable. Brown’s description of the normative character of international society recalls the abstract norms and values of formal rationality, and the society of states reflects Tocqueville’s principal of equality. Moreover, the development of state behavior and diplomatic procedures resembles the general tendency of Weber’s rationalization process. In this regard, it is worth recalling the example of Innstetten. The normative order of Prussia’s aristocracy was hardly in conformity with the norms of the current society of states, and “pre-modern states” would have followed Innstetten’s decision to wage war in order to achieve justice. That discursive argumentation and persuasion became a major feature of international relations is in itself a late result of the modernization process (cf. Risse 2000).

This analogy between the macro- and micro-sociological realm brings us to the question of how the normative structures of international society have evolved. In pointing at the principle of balance of power, Brown mentions that this model relies on the self-restraint of states. Obviously there is at the international level a similar mechanism at work as in Elias’ linkage between state-formation and the social conduct of individuals. In international relations we can also observe the conversion of outer constraints into self-restraints. There are two theoretical points of departure to explain this development. It is either a result of constraints imposed by the anarchical structure of the international system, or it indicates the impact of the hegemonic power of economic interdependencies. To put it in Marx’s terms, the abstract logic of value relations increasingly penetrates inter-state relations. A third explanation could be based on societal changes within modern states. Then the normative rules of international society reflect the dominant democratic discourse of national civil societies, demanding the application of formal norms and legal procedures in both domestic and international politics.

In clearly going beyond the scope of international society, the world cultural approach develops parts of Weber's model of modernity further. Sociological institutionalism conceptualizes a world society based on structures of a world culture that emerged in close interaction with the state. In the concept of George Thomas (and colleagues), rationalistic, universalistic, expansive and functionally integrated global culture constitutes world society through a multitude of collective and individual actors that are either of state or non-state origin and characterized by a high degree of organizational isomorphism. Thomas emphasizes the universalization of formal rationality as a means of social organization that "affects almost every aspect of social life" (Meyer *et al.* 1997: 162). Additionally, he promotes the advancement of global culture in a normative sense, describing world society also as a moral order based on universal norms and values.

Two aspects link the institutionalist approach more closely to the theoretical framework here. First, in disclosing the organizational isomorphism of nationalist or fundamentalist movements, Thomas points at the uneven development of cognitive and normative aspects of formal rationality. Apparently these movements are modern in organization, but traditional in their symbolic motivation. They display the compatibility of modern and traditional elements and thus a similar unevenness of the political and symbolic realms as Habermas describes in the development of European states. In this sense, counter-modern political movements are less phenomena of reflexive modernity, but rather indicators for the still ongoing transformation of traditional societies.

Second, in introducing non-state organizations as major global actors, sociological institutionalism increases our awareness of changing political structures. On the one hand, NGOs and INGOs extend the scope of functional differentiation to the global level. Like the ministerial subdivision of national governments, international and transnational organizations deal with political issues according to clear functional subdivisions. In structural terms, NGOs and INGOs follow precisely the bureaucratic principles of nation states: division of labor, functional specification, and expert training. In this respect they confirm the dominant role of integration via functional differentiation in global change and they lift state-related political features to the international level. On the other hand, more and more NGOs deal with the ecological consequences of risk society and with normative issues such as human rights, gender affairs or conditions of labor. As representatives of a growing global civil society, they articulate the contradictions of modernity and promote the necessity to counterbalance functional differentiation by social integration. Do they have the potential to integrate global systemic structures into fragmented lifeworlds? Can non-state actors play a role on the global stage comparable to the one that European nation states played in the rationalization of traditional lifeworlds via juridification?

If the answer was yes, the central premise of Luhmann's systems theory, that an inevitable tendency of decentralization and functional separation characterizes world society, would have to be reversed. Theoretically, world society could find its normative center and a source of political legitimacy in the universal

norms and values of formal value rationality. In this rather optimistic reading, the sociological approach to world society is in line with Lothar Brock's observation that world society formation involves processes such as the internalization of universal norms or constitution-building beyond the state. Yet this optimistic reading characterizes only one side of the global coin.

A more pessimistic view at the emergence of world society must emphasize the negative consequences of functional integration. Especially concerning the political realm, the argument of decentralization has to be taken seriously. The developmental disparity between economic and political systems meanwhile causes a dramatic decline in the extractive competencies of the state, whose key monopolies of physical force and taxation become undermined. The model of the interventionist state, which is clearly visible behind Habermas' rationalization of the lifeworld, seems to lose its economic foundations. Given the lack of the means of physical force, it is highly questionable whether non-state actors are able to substitute the important role the nation state played in developing generally accepted legal standards which, historically, were first enforced by coercive means.

In many parts of the world state formation tends to turn to the other extreme under the impact of global constraints. Nation-building results in state-decay, and anarchy becomes increasingly a feature of intra-state politics. In the European model, the nation state once operated as a mediator between functional differentiation and social disintegration. Claiming a unity of economic, political and cultural reproduction, the nation state was itself of a hybrid character. On the one hand, the state was an abstract, rational and bureaucratic political machine, while on the other hand, the primordially defined nation offered a symbolic point of reference that was compatible with the prevalent forms of traditional identity structures. In this specific historical form, the nation state bridged the huge gulf between global and local aspects of social life, between the economic and symbolic reproduction of society, and was able to reconcile functional imperatives with the demands of lifeworld. Yet, the European way of state building is no longer a blueprint for the political integration of the war-torn societies in the South (cf. Jung 2003).

Nevertheless, these findings do not render the historical experiences of Europe and the classical sociology of modernity which was built on them obsolete. On the contrary, the sociological concepts presented here can help us understand the emergence of a world society that is a larger but empirically fragmented social whole. Together with Modern Systems Theory the classics offer a reservoir of conceptual tools to upgrading the (undertheorized) concept of society that according to Albert's chapter characterizes IR theory. Both conceptualize modern society as a self-referential and all-encompassing system whose principle of functional differentiation became the dynamic force behind global integration. Yet a mode of integration that feeds on difference. In order to operate and to be conceived as a social whole, the functionally differentiated world society has to be complemented by a form of social integration that rests on formal value rationality and that is able to bridge the operational closure of

subsystems. This social recoupling of system and lifeworld on a global scale also seems to be the precondition for the evolution of world society as a moral order.

## Notes

- 1 Some parts of the second and third sections of this chapter appeared in the *European Journal of International Relations*, 7 (4), December 2001.
- 2 Here a note of caution may be appropriate. The mere semantic parallel between Immanuel Wallerstein's world system theory (Wallerstein 1974) and Luhmann's systems theory of world society should not lead to a confusion of these two entirely different concepts. Coming from the background of *dependencia* theory, Wallerstein's approach must be viewed from a Luhmannian perspective as a form of economist anachronism.
- 3 For a recent article about the relevance of this dichotomy in Iran's internal political debate, see Arjomand 2002.
- 4 This reading of risk society resonates somehow in Norbert Elias' optimistic view.

**Part III**

**Bringing Modern  
Systems Theory to  
the study of IR**

Concepts and questions





## 9 Systems and sovereignty

A systems theoretical look at the transformation of sovereignty

*Anders Esmark*

### **Sovereignty all over again?**

It is hardly controversial to state that the issue of sovereignty has been the core concern in the field of International Relations. In the words of Hedley Bull, one might even say that IR is a discipline founded on the existence of state sovereignty at both a normative and a factual level (cf. Bull 1995 [1977]: 8). But it is also a fact that the current struggle to come to terms (literally speaking) with globalization within IR has generated some controversy about state sovereignty. The increasing lack of faith in the “international system” of states as a viable conceptualization of contemporary world politics (see Albert’s chapter in this volume) has led to serious doubts as to the existence of sovereignty at both the “normative” and the “factual” level. Thus, it very often follows from the proposition that globalization or even a fully constituted global sphere is a fact of late modern life that state sovereignty is taken to be “losing out,” in “crisis” or in “decline” (cf. Held 1995; Castells 1997; Sassen 1996, 1998).

However the assumption that globalization necessarily implies a “crisis” or even an “end” of sovereignty is somewhat unfortunate (cf. Walker 2000). Very often, the conclusion is drawn more as a matter of reflex than reflection. In general, this is the case when the issue of sovereignty is discussed within the semantic framework of “the disappearance of the state.” Here, globalization is seen as a challenge or threat to the state, “hollowing out” the state (cf. Rhodes 1997; Jessop 2001). When sovereignty is regarded as either *state* sovereignty or *popular* sovereignty – the two great notions of sovereignty inherent in the nation state – it follows from the semantics of the disappearance of the state that we are also rapidly approaching the end of sovereignty.

It is an assumption underlying the argument of this chapter that globalization is a fact of late modernity. It is also assumed that the “nation state” is indeed becoming a concept of little use to contemporary IR or political science in general, even though the abundance of metaphors for the disappearance of the state may not be the most precise way to describe the situation. Yet what is not argued here is that globalization would produce a “crisis” of sovereignty. Rather, it is claimed that the semantics of sovereignty has made use of the state to *facilitate*

globalization. Globalization is not a dynamic threatening an already constituted sovereignty. Sovereignty has always served to meet the different needs of the process of globalization. Instead of asking whether sovereignty is threatened by globalization, one could rather ask to what degree different forms of sovereignty have produced more or less plausible responses to the process of globalization. It may still be that sovereignty is in crisis, but it does not follow from the disappearance of the state. It may be that sovereignty does very well without the state.

Such a question is at least one possible consequence of the Modern Systems Theory of Niklas Luhmann. In Modern Systems Theory globalization is understood as the constitution of a functionally differentiated world society. The constitution of the functionally differentiated world society is the core dynamic in the historical era of modernity, which in the systems theoretical view ranges from its earliest traits in the sixteenth century until today.<sup>1</sup> The modern era is a by-and-large unbroken process of increased functional differentiation. It follows that the establishment and change of *modern* sovereignty should be viewed as something taking place entirely within an overarching process of globalization, understood as the constitution of a functionally differentiated world society. In a systems theoretical view, the question is how sovereignty relates to functional differentiation. In general, the answer is that sovereignty is a *response* to problems inherent in functional differentiation.

It seems possible to discern two relatively distinct systems theoretical strategies for observing how this takes place. The first may be labelled “paradoxification” (*Paradoxifizierung*) and bears more than a little resemblance to the different analyses of sovereignty that have been conducted in a poststructuralist vein within IR recently. But rather than just reading sovereignty as text, the object of the systems theoretical strategy of paradoxification is to relate the semantics of sovereignty to the thesis about modernity as the constitution of a functionally differentiated world society. Consequently, the semantics of sovereignty is read as a response to a paradox inherent in a functionally distinct global system of politics. Sovereignty facilitates globalization as a “semantic trick” making political communication possible. As a strategy of observation, paradoxification means tracing the semantics of sovereignty back to the paradox of political communication. The second strategy may be labelled “deparadoxification” (*Paradoxieauflösung*). To put it rather bluntly, the object of such a strategy is to ask if and how sovereignty plays a part in presently operative social systems, *even though* it is possible to find a paradox in the heart of sovereignty.

### **Paradoxification and deparadoxification**

The importance of the paradox in Modern Systems Theory arises from the fact that Luhmann’s theory is both a sociology of differentiation and a philosophy of difference. From this standpoint, a paradox arises as the “unity of distinction” (*Einheit der Unterscheidung*). In this form, the paradox is a classic issue for sociology. Luhmann is in line with a strong tradition for recognizing modernity as fundamentally paradoxical, in this sense following classics like Durkheim’s analysis of

“anomalies” of modern society such as suicide, and Marx’s analysis of the drive to both internalize and externalize the exterior in any capitalist system of production. But whereas the classics often regard paradox as the tragedy of modernity, Luhmann has no tendency to view paradox in the moral clothing of tragedy. In classic sociology, *differentiation* has often been seen as a historical development leading away from a lost organic community or from a moral unity. But for Luhmann, differentiation is given at any social domain at any time. At the level of sociology, Luhmann poses this point very clearly when he states that he takes differentiation to be the core of sociology, but that he takes the question of the *form of differentiation* to be the right question rather than the view that differentiation in general should be something distinctly modern (cf. Luhmann 1997a: 615). There is no identity beyond differentiation – temporally or spatially – but only different forms of differentiation framing the paradox of identity within difference in different ways. And in modernity, the paradox relates to functional differentiation as the primary form of differentiation in world society.

Luhmann’s *sociology of differentiation* and his rejection of identity beyond the varying forms of differentiation at the sociological level are supported by what might tentatively be called his *philosophy* or even *logic of difference* (cf. Luhmann 1995a: chapter 2). Luhmann did not see himself as a philosopher, but it seems clear that his thoughts on the primacy of difference go somewhat further than sociology in a narrow sense. Everything Luhmann writes is built on the assumption that “drawing a distinction” is the primary event constituting anything within the social or psychic realm. Luhmann found different sources inspiring this view, for example the concept of autopoiesis taken from biology (cf. Maturana 1981), which resulted in the distinction between system and environment, Gregory Bateson’s notion that information arises only as a “difference that makes a difference” (Luhmann 1996: 39), and even to some extent Jacques Derrida’s notion of “différance” (cf. Baecker 1993: 19).

But the most important source for Luhmann when pushing this point is a calculus on the “Laws of Form” (Spencer Brown 1977 [1969]). This peculiar piece of work could be said to be an (the only?) attempt to give the philosophy of difference (more or less equating poststructuralism, see Frank 1989) the form of a logical calculus. If the philosophy of difference were to have its logic, much as any decent philosophy has always been supposed to, the calculus of form would probably be it, although it was in no way developed as such. As might be suspected, the calculus differs somewhat from traditional logic and has never gained any significant acceptance among logicians and mathematicians. But nonetheless it became an increasingly important source of inspiration for Luhmann throughout his career.

Briefly stated, Spencer Brown attempts to produce a logic that shows how order arises from a situation of simple distinction between the inside of a form (the marked side) and the outside of a form (the unmarked side). This is called the form of distinction. The first operation in the calculus is always to “draw a distinction!” (cf. Spencer Brown 1977 [1969]). The distinction is taken to be primary in the sense that any further operation is bound by this initial distinction,

making any transgression of the distinction impossible without breaking the chain of operations and starting off with an entirely new distinction. Based on this insistence on the primacy of distinction, paradox arises in the form of a claim to a unity beyond distinction.

Seeking a final identity can only result in a so-called “re-entry” (Spencer Brown 1977 [1969]). This describes exactly the attempt to produce identity under the conditions of the primacy of distinction: the distinction is copied back into itself at either side of the distinction. In the strict terms of the calculus of form, the paradox of any first distinction is the fact that the distinction is always already re-entered in itself (cf. Baecker 1993). This situation beyond the distinction bears close resemblance to the “zone of indistinction” proposed by Agamben (1998 [1995]) and we might say that the zone of indistinction is the only thing possible beyond distinction. A final identity in this sense *proposes an impossible necessity beyond the arbitrariness of the first distinction*. Such a unity may be proposed *ideologically*, thus attempting to conceal the arbitrariness of distinction. But it may also be used *reflexively* to expose the paradox as the only “ground” of any distinction (Baecker suggests “quicksand” instead of “ground”; cf. Baecker 1993).

Luhmann rather straightforwardly imports this proposition from the realm of logical systems to the realm of social systems. Paradox comes in this way to be regarded as the ontology of the social, which in more proper systems theoretical terms is to say that the paradox is the “endformula” of all observations (*Abschlussformel*; Luhmann 2000d: 10). The strategy of paradoxification simply implies using this “endformula.” Social systems always emerge by way of ideology, i.e. deparadoxification. Systems in a situation of indistinction are not operational since the distinction that serves as the basis for all operations and communications is not solid. In this situation systems cannot determine what side of the operation to “mark” and make the basis of further operations and communications. Reflexivity is a dangerous business for systems, which is why Luhmann states that systems have to operate “blindly.” In a zone of indistinction, systems cannot move forward but can only “oscillate” (cf. Luhmann 2000d; Baecker 1993). Systems need to operate ideologically, i.e. deparadoxifying themselves in order to be operational.

The strategy of paradoxification uses the paradox as “endformula” and traces the social system under analysis back to the paradox inherent in its founding distinction. Paradoxification simply aims at bringing this situation about. Insofar as the strategy works as a counter-movement to the “ideological” deparadoxification emergent systems have to perform in order to operate, one might tentatively call the strategy counter-hegemonic in the same sense as deconstructivism. Clearly, what is at stake is the introduction of contingency through the notion of paradox (although specifically in the sense framed by Spencer Brown). But paradoxification can never be a goal in itself for Modern Systems Theory, even though the strategy is clearly used. The introduction of contingency either through the paradox or through genealogy is not sufficient.<sup>2</sup> One might recall Gunther Teubner’s brilliant discussion of the relationship between deconstruc-

tion and systems theory regarding the system of law, in which the affinity between deconstruction and the strategy of paradoxification is clearly acknowledged, but where the limitations of deconstruction are also discussed in a relatively straightforward manner:

Deconstructivism is not sufficiently critical, not radical enough! In several respects, deconstructivism does not go far enough in ruthlessly pursuing its own enterprise. It stops short of drawing consequences from its dissolution of stable systems into paradoxes and multiple identities. ... From a systems perspective, deconstruction is a bit like modernity's carnival, a funny exciting and at the same time sad and desperate reversal of its tangled hierarchies, but basically an entertaining enterprise without consequences. ... The remarkable thing is that law's hierarchy has survived and probably will survive all subversive discoveries of its tangled, circular character, all undermining revelations of paradoxical foundations, all threatening contradictions of multiple identities.

(Teubner 1996a: 5)

To move further than the tragicomic carnival of modernity, Modern Systems Theory suggests working with a distinction between semantics and societal structure that does not reduce everything to a common level of text, but seeks to explore the connections between semantics and the post-deconstructive reality outside of semantics (Teubner 1996a: 6). This implies first that the paradox is not just seen as something inherent in the text but as something that *arises from the level of societal structure*, i.e. the form of differentiation. In other words, Modern Systems Theory tries to connect transformations at the semantic level to transformations outside of semantics.

Much has been said about the distinction between system and environment, but it tends to be left out in the literature on Luhmann that his primary analytical strategy is based on other distinctions. When trying to analyze the emergence of concrete systems, Luhmann generally proceeds either through the distinction between *medium* and *form* or the distinction between *semantics* and *societal structure*. In both cases, the system is the *unmarked* side of the distinction, which is to say that the system is *not* what is observed. With the distinction between medium and form the system emerges only as the potential insertion of a form (fixed couplings) in an observed medium (loose couplings). In the case of the distinction between semantics and societal structure, societal structure is taken to mean the form of differentiation between systems that lies behind observed semantic evolution. In both cases, the system is regarded as something "behind" either medium or semantics. In both cases we have a distinction between something regarded as being "the case" (*Was ist der Fall?*) and something "lying behind" (*Was steckt dahinter?*) (cf. Luhmann 2000d; Baecker 1998).<sup>3</sup>

In the case of the distinction between medium and form, the guiding question is when and how a symbolically generalized medium develops, which makes otherwise unlikely communication more likely.<sup>4</sup> In the case of functionally differentiated

systems, this is formalized in the rule that no system develops without a symbolically generalized medium to carry it. No economic system without money. No family without love. No political system without power etc. This approach is rooted solidly within the traditional realm of sociology, counting both Parsons and Habermas among its users (cf. Künzler 1989). The primary differences between Luhmann and other proponents of the strategy pertain to both the number of such symbolically generalized media, covering the full range of functionally differentiated systems proposed in systems theory, and to the view that no medium has an integrative effect that bridges functional differentiation.

In the case of the distinction between semantics and societal structure, the assumption is that the evolution of the structure of a system is reflected in the stock of semantic artefacts within world society. The distinction between semantics and societal structure is modelled upon the distinction between conceptual history and social history in the “German history of concepts” (*Deutsche Begriffsgeschichte*; cf. Koselleck 1982). However, Luhmann finds *Begriffsgeschichte* unable to give a plausible explanation to the changes in the studied concepts since there is nothing (no society) behind these concepts (cf. Luhmann 1980: 14). Instead, Luhmann proposes seeing changes at the level of semantics always as partly a *response* to changes at the level of societal structure. Semantics is not determined in a rigid sense by changes in the societal structure, but there is a constitutive level of societal structure formed as paradox outside of semantics.

In this sense, systems theory departs from deconstructivism by way of a distinction between semantics and societal structure that suggests a material difference uncommon to deconstructivism and furthermore places the paradox at the level of societal structure. This difference becomes even more marked when the distinction between semantics and societal structure is employed as a means of deparadoxification. Here, the distinction is not put to use as a means to localize paradoxes, but rather as an explicit means of deparadoxification in systems theory itself. Of course, the distinction may itself be paradoxified by others, but the point made by Luhmann in this regard is that systems theory may – as any other system – become operative nonetheless. When moving on to deparadoxification, the relationship between semantics and societal structure is reversed (in more systems theoretical terms, we should say that structure becomes the marked side of the distinction). This strategy is less explicit in Luhmann’s writings, but that it is a possible strategy is shown by the fact that the distinction between semantics and societal structure is itself always already re-entered in itself (cf. Stäheli 1997). Consequently, semantics is viewed as constitutive rather than belated. One might even speak about the “effect” or the “efficiency” of semantics insofar as the question is how well systems work *even though* their semantics are driven by paradox. This also shifts the temporality of the observation. Whereas paradoxification is directed at the past, since the object is to trace semantics back to prior changes in societal structure, deparadoxification is more directed at the present or even at the future since it is concerned with operative systems. Deparadoxification implies following the “ideological” move that systems themselves do, thus running the risk of *unfolding* paradoxes

precisely in the same way any social system does. The reluctance to do so within deconstructivism in both its logico-formal shape or in the more genealogical vein has to do with fact that one obviously runs the risk of being aligned with the enemy and becoming the target of deconstruction oneself. But in the words of Teubner, the remarkable thing is that systems work so well in spite of the numerous discoveries of their founding paradoxes. But first a few words on the paradox at hand.

### **Paradoxification**

Regarded in this way, the semantics of sovereignty evolves as a response to a paradox inherent in a certain form of differentiation. When connected to the thesis about modernity, the semantics of sovereignty is seen as a response to the development of a functionally differentiated world society. Among the systems in the functionally differentiated world society, sovereignty relates first and foremost to the political system. Sovereignty obviously comes to bear on the system of law, but this happens primarily within the constitutional state (*Verfassungsstaat*). In that sense Schmitt's famous proposition that sovereignty remains a "juridical concept" is substituted by the claim that sovereignty is basically a political issue. In systems theoretical terms, sovereignty arises as a response to the paradox arising from the emergence of a functionally distinct *global system of politics*. Or, in other words, sovereignty develops as semantics relating to the paradox of the political system. It is in this sense that sovereignty can be said to have always facilitated globalization: from the onset, sovereignty has served to make a global system of politics operational. Correspondingly, transformations in the semantics of sovereignty relate first and foremost to different ruptures in the system of politics where the paradox of politics threatens to block the system of politics: where the system of politics enters a "zone of indistinction." In other words, sovereignty is a "semantic trick," making the system of politics operational. The strategy of paradoxification, as it were, amounts to tracing the semantics of sovereignty back to these paradoxes and thus exposing sovereignty as a "myth" driven only by the need to conceal these paradoxes.

Such an analysis resembles several more or less poststructuralist readings of sovereignty within IR, either as political theory (cf. Walker 1993, 2000), genealogy (cf. Bartelson 1995), or conceptual history (cf. Onuf 1991). The notion of sovereignty as simulation (cf. Weber 1995; Biersteker and Weber 1996) or even hypocrisy (cf. Krasner 1999, even though Krasner might not be squeezed into the category of poststructuralism that easily) is also relevant here. However, Luhmann's notion of a global system of politics behind the semantics of sovereignty gives the analysis another spin. Most analyses within IR, even from a poststructuralist standpoint, have proceeded from the assumption that the semantics of sovereignty pertain somehow to the constitution of statehood and exclusive territoriality as a primary form of differentiation. Functional differentiation has not yet been an issue. But Luhmann's point is that exclusive territoriality as a form of differentiation was *always enveloped* by functional differentiation. From a systems



theoretical point of view the point is that the entire process of achieving exclusive territoriality took place *within* a global system of politics. Globalization is not something that comes after the modern state. It was always at the core of modernity itself. Consequently, all the great concepts tied to the process of modern statehood are viewed as semantic tricks pertaining to the global system of politics. The driving force behind the semantics of sovereignty is thus to be found in the paradox inherent in the *form of political communication* within the global and autonomous system of politics – and nowhere else.

Generally, Luhmann specifies the medium of the political system as being power (see Guzzini's chapter in this volume). In one of his more important pieces on the semantics of the system of politics, however, Luhmann defines political communication as communication where the collectively binding decision is used as medium (cf. Luhmann 1995b). Power in this way comes to mean the communicative production of a collectively binding decision. In other words, political communication has to be able to tell (collectively) *binding decisions* from *arbitrary decisions*. This frames the threatening paradox of political communication as the instance where the indistinction between the binding and the arbitrary decision becomes apparent. In the words of Luhmann, this paradox takes the form of the identity of the distinction between binding and arbitrary decisions (*Bindung/Willkür*). Seen from the perspective of Modern Systems Theory, the fundamental drive in all political communication is to get out of this deadlock.

All political communication is fundamentally obliged to inform about the certain quality that makes the decision at hand collectively binding as opposed to arbitrary. If no such information is given, we may assume that the decision is arbitrary and only binds the deciding part. For a political decision to be taken, arbitrariness and contingency will have to be relegated from the decision at hand. This is easier said than done. Each political communication is plagued by the fact that the collectively binding decision is never made by the collective itself. The distance between the decider held accountable in communication and the reference to a collective makes political communication very prone to contingency. Political communication always tends to include the possibility of another decision, of another decider (cf. Luhmann 1995b: 105). This in turn produces a need for semantic tricks, "self-mystifications" (Luhmann 1995b: 106) and "final unities" (Luhmann 2000a: 340) that make political communication work *in spite* of the constitutive paradox of political communication. Such final unities attempt a deparadoxification of political communication by suggesting an answer to the question: "What would then be the unity of the distinction between arbitrariness and distinction, the unity of the form? Or in other words: the unity of the political system?" (Luhmann 2000a: 345).

One of the most important "self-mystifications" or "final identities" in political communication is sovereignty (cf. Luhmann 2000a: 33). The semantics of sovereignty within the political system yield the possibility of moving out of the constitutive paradox of political communication by way of ideology. This certainly does not mean that the paradox is solved. If a paradox could simply be solved, it would not be a paradox. But exactly because we are dealing with

deparadoxification and not simply a solving of the paradox, the historical evolution of the semantics of sovereignty is always a precarious business that never reaches full closure, i.e. a “perfect” semantic of sovereignty. Every semantic of sovereignty so far has had limited durability. Each political text may have been able to maintain plausibility for some time, but has in the end “self-deconstructed” due to reappearances of the paradox caused by transformations in societal structure. Societal structure may in this sense be regarded as providing *conditions of plausibility*.

It is possible to discern three “political texts” on sovereignty which follow upon each other in relatively distinct historical succession. Each text makes reference to a certain state-form that implies different final identities or “Sovereigns”: monarchies (the Monarch), republics (the people, the nation, the public), and the constitutional state or *Verfassungsstaat* (the constitution). As can be seen, the texts are somewhat traditional. But Luhmann’s intention is not to discover new and exotic texts of sovereignty, but rather to trace the political texts identified by both the history of ideas and deconstruction back to the different variations of the paradox of the global system of politics. Consequently, the different state-forms should only be regarded as identities proposed by different texts on sovereignty, which is to say that *neither state-form is to be understood as an operative social system*:

It makes more sense to proceed in a historically-comparative fashion when judging the reality and the empirical durability of communications made in the name of the state. The question is which form of deparadoxification becomes convincing at different points in time and under which structural conditions. Or in other words: which historically given experiences favor or block deconstruction, respectively. ... Perhaps the state is not the self-realization of an already existing unity, but rather the result of a self-mystification necessary to establish continuity from communication to communication, from event to event.

(Luhmann 1995b: 107)

The modern political system emerges the moment the distinction between binding and arbitrary distinctions carves out a sphere from other systems incapable of drawing such a distinction, most notably religion (the church, the clergy), family and law (the nobility and their codes of conduct). When acting on a divine mandate or inherited right, there is no such thing as an arbitrary decision. Centuries later, the process of differentiation from church and nobility is still incomplete. But nonetheless it is possible to identify the moment this differentiation is initiated by the distinction between collectively binding and arbitrary decisions. Historically speaking, this moment may be dated at different points in time throughout the sixteenth century, but the formalization of the territorial state as a principle of communication (which would be the systems theoretical view on the peace of Westphalia) marks a definite turning point.

The emergence of the distinctly political sphere produces the *first* text on modern sovereignty, in which the Sovereign *person* (the Monarch) is suggested as

the guarantor of the collectively binding decisions within a certain territory. The emergence of a distinctly political sphere thus coincides with *the self-exemption* of the Sovereign from church and nobility (cf. Luhmann 1995b: 108). Sovereignty as unitary power within a territory implies first a territorial domestication of the nobility (not least aided by the development in the economic system), whereby the nobility comes to depend on centralized power for recognition of privileges and solutions to internal strife and conflict fostered by the many and delicate differences between different branches of nobility (cf. Luhmann 1997a: 721). Second, it implies the exemption of political power from the clergy, i.e. the system of religion (cf. Luhmann 2000a: 335).

The terrain marked out by this self-exemption becomes the territory of the state. Sovereignty comes to mean the unity of state power within a certain territory. It is clear that sovereignty was divided into internal and external sovereignty from the outset. Consequently, external sovereignty remains a source of contingency for internal sovereignty and vice versa. But Luhmann holds that the primary concern in the early texts on sovereignty was not so much international independence as internal sovereignty (cf. Luhmann 2000a: 339). The sovereignty of the Monarch becomes “the place from which the semantic self-description of the political system is directed towards the state” (Luhmann 2000a: 338). However, the invention of the Sovereign person pushes the problem of exonerating arbitrariness from binding decision into the person or even literally the sacred body of the Sovereign. The invention of the Sovereign was directed at the arbitrariness of decision practiced by the church and the nobility, but arbitrariness reoccurs within the Sovereign. The Sovereign is posed as the unity of state power within a territory (*L'état c'est moi*), but this frames the threatening paradox as the arbitrariness of the Sovereign person. The binding force in collectively binding decisions is invested in the Sovereign: the collectively binding decision comes to equal the “self-binding” of the Sovereign himself. A properly self-bound Sovereign is a legitimate Sovereign. This relationship is the core of representation as understood by Hobbes. But this in turn makes any arbitrariness in the Sovereign person a danger to the collectively binding decision. As a response, the literature on both *Staatsräson* (reason of state) and contract theory tries to represent this equalization between the collectively binding decision and the self-binding of the Prince as a plausible arrangement.

The literature on *Staatsräson* transforms the issue of self-binding into a question of moral virtue or even a metaphysical “gift” for statesmanship as suggested by Bodin. The Sovereign is a person of particular quality that sets him aside from the profane inclinations of mortal men. In this way the Sovereign becomes distinct from the tyrant. This is to some extent a “highly plausible arrangement” since it maintains that the Sovereign is bound by nothing other than himself (cf. Luhmann 2000a: 340). However, the paradox reappears whenever the “law” defining the virtue or the gift of the Monarch is to be decided. Here, the Monarch reappears again within divine or profane law (see also Kantorowicz 1957; Agamben 1998 [1995]). And if nothing else, the Sovereign shows himself exactly to be among the ranks of mortal men at the time of his death (cf.

Luhmann 1995b: 109). Hobbes famously attempts a solution when suggesting that the Sovereign is an “artificial” person. But this transforms the problem into one of securing different Sovereigns as incarnations of the same person. This may work to some extent, but requires belief in reincarnation, which makes the text prone to self-deconstruction.

The literature on the contract attempts another solution, partly necessary to console sovereignty with a new social stratification and the social class of the citizen (*Bürger*), brought about by the state itself. The result is the notion of a social contract. The substance of the contract is a political text on “happiness” (*Glückseligkeit*): the Sovereign is legitimate as long as everyone is “happy” within their class (cf. Luhmann 1995b: 110). The contract, however, is the least plausible arrangement of all, since it does not propose a unity of sovereignty. It maintains the existence of the Sovereign while denying him exemption from both divine *and* profane law (the law of nature). As a result, the Sovereign is constantly torn apart by the very same difference in the form of the distinction between constitutive power (absolute power, *potestas absoluta*) and constituted power (ordinary power, *potestas ordinata*). The social contract in this sense seems to be a transitory program en route to a new Sovereign.

The *second* text on sovereignty is marked by the “democratization” of the political system initiated by the French and American revolutions and marked in the history of ideas by Rousseau and Locke. For Luhmann, the primary importance of these revolutions lies in the fact that killing the Monarch makes political communication take notice of what took place some time ago, namely the emergence (*Ausdifferenzierung*) of a system of politics independent of society and forced to self-organize: “that it became necessary to find a substitution for the (body of) the Monarch brought the problem of the self-organization of the political to the fore” (Luhmann 2000a: 349). Consequently, representation and legitimacy no longer rest on the self-binding of the Monarch but on the self-organization of the political system as a whole. The task of sovereignty is to propose a plausible solution to the foundation of this self-organization.

The result is the text on popular sovereignty, in which the Sovereign person is substituted by the Sovereign *people*, which later appears as both “public” (*Öffentlichkeit*) and “nation.” Sovereignty is no longer exempted from law: sovereignty is derived from the new notion of individuality and the law of man (human rights). It follows that sovereignty is supposed to solve the many democratic problems arising from this conception of representation as the proper self-organization of the political system. These problems cannot be discussed in detail here. Suffice it to say that any attempt at a self-organization supposedly in accordance with popular sovereignty comes up against the paradox that the people will have to be both ruler and ruled. The old problem of self-binding may be gone, but the problem of self-organization has taken its place. This is the essence of Rousseau’s radical principle of popular sovereignty: the only non-arbitrary (and therefore collectively binding) decision is the decision where the people are both ruler and ruled. This is suggested in the notion of *volonté générale*, but the whole tradition of modern democratic theory attests to the fact that even

the most refined forms of self-organization cannot do away with the basic paradox. More remarks could be made on the particular variations of this paradox pertaining to the more refined concepts of the public and the nation, but as a matter of deparadoxification, they remain prone to the same sort of self-deconstruction as the original concept of the people.

The *third* text attempts a new solution of the problems generated by popular sovereignty. This text is related to the liberal constitutional state (*Verfassungsstaat*) established roughly between the end of the eighteenth century and the end of the nineteenth century. This text reacts to popular sovereignty in much the same way as the social contract reacted to state sovereignty. But there is one very important difference: whereas the social contract could only resort to either the law of nature or divine law, the constitution can resort to the *positive* law of a modern, functionally differentiated system of law. The political text of the constitution does not suggest a new Sovereign, but only a formalization of the *division* of sovereignty between state and people (public and private) and again within different branches of the state. But contrary to the social contract, this apparently problematic notion of divided sovereignty remains a plausible *political* arrangement due to the fact that it exports the paradox of the unity of sovereignty to the modern system of law. Understood as a purely political phenomenon, the constitution remains vulnerable to the same distinction between constituted and constitutive power as the contract does. This is also reflected in the fact that the constitution has to set up guidelines for its own change or annulment. Another problem is the acceptance of an outside that is included in most constitutions, making external sovereignty re-enter into internal sovereignty in a very concrete way.

Yet the system of law offers a solution that cannot be attempted within a political text: the problem of the identity of sovereignty is resolved by the tautology of positive law that cannot be attempted in political communication without being identified with arbitrary decisions. The constitution provides an efficient structural coupling between the system of law and the system of politics: the foundation of the political system then ultimately resides in the system of law and vice versa. The arbitrariness of a political decision can be defined as a decision not in accordance with the constitution, and the foundation of the hierarchy of legal sources may on the other hand be exported to the system of politics (cf. Luhmann 1997a: 782). The liberal constitutional state is not the end of history, but in systems theoretical terms something that comes relatively close: Luhmann goes so far as to say that the constitutional state seems to be “without alternatives” for some time (cf. Luhmann 1995b: 112). One might even say that the structural coupling to the modern system of law makes it possible for the system of politics to exclude the arbitrariness of decision quite plausibly – though not ultimately, of course.

The liberal constitutional state is the last state-form invoked by a text on sovereignty. But Luhmann introduces one more state-form, namely the welfare state. The welfare state is explicitly not a fiction produced by a text on sovereignty, but rather an alternative text based on what might be called *solidarity*.

This text attempts an entirely different solution to the paradox of politics, assigning the collectively binding decision to solidarity or even equality. In Luhmann's perspective, the welfare state is a specific response to increased functional differentiation. The text no longer refers only to the internal paradoxes generated by the emergence of the functionally distinct system of politics itself. Rather, the text calls for more and more *redistribution* due to increased functional differentiation. The welfare state can be seen as an attempted response to functional differentiation that the liberal constitutional state cannot produce in itself. But in proposing this response, the welfare state also means "the end of sovereignty" as a favored semantic trick in political communication: "The new problems of world society erode all of the old formulas of the state, first and foremost the formula of sovereignty, through which the state as a source of collectively binding decisions was covered up" (Luhmann 1995b: 118).

The problem now is to combine the collectively binding decision with functional differentiation, that is to combine the common good with an ever more detailed redistribution in and between functional systems. The more the performance of state functions is at odds with functional differentiation within the confines of a territory, the more the state faces a problem regarding the capacity to provide collectively binding decisions. It meets ever more problems and its solutions produce more problems. The state "loses" itself in the attempt to correct the effects of its own intentions. For a while, the internal differentiation of the political system in political parties, administration and "the audience" seemed to do the trick. But to keep the whole show running, a constant growth in capacity (for collectively binding decisions) is needed to postpone and remember every unfulfilled wish (cf. Luhmann 1990b). This may have worked for a while and it seemed possible to discuss values without concerning oneself with discrepancies in relation to decisions. But in the end, the welfare state cannot be upheld as a plausible proposition either: "It would seem that this text on the state (*Vertextung des Staates*) has also come to an end. ... Reforms remain possible, but it seems they can only gain consensus because their consequences cannot be foreseen" (Luhmann 1995b: 118).

### **Deparadoxification**

It would seem that we have indeed reached the end of sovereignty and state. But the strategy of paradoxification is not the only option produced by systems theory, even though it may be the one most rigorously pursued by Luhmann when it comes to sovereignty. As mentioned, we may reverse the relationship between semantics and societal structure. Traditionally, the distinction between societal structure and semantics is treated as a distinction between the material and the symbolic and the question whether structure determines semantics or vice versa is determined as a matter of ontological stance. However, the calculus of form and the notion of re-entry tell us that the distinction itself can never warrant a determinate relationship between the two sides of the distinction. It is only a question of "marking" one side in a distinction and making this

the basis of further communication. One may have preferences (or “motives” in the terms of Spencer Brown) for one of the options, which is why we have ontology. But there is nothing “incoherent” in marking one side *and then* the other as strategies of observation within Modern Systems Theory. It can even be said to be a more coherent strategy when accepting the notion of re-entry (cf. Stäheli 1997, 2000).

The reversal of the relationship between semantics and societal structure is both spatial and temporal. Spatially, it implies pushing semantics into the background in favor of societal structure. Societal structure is no longer reduced to a paradox pushing forward the transformation of semantics. Instead, semantics is regarded as constitutive of societal structure. Temporally, the notion of semantics as a belated response to societal structure is left behind for the view that societal structure follows from semantics. It is important to notice, however, that the distinction is not abandoned: it is only reversed. Societal structure and semantics are not observed as being on one common plane like that of “text” or “discourse.” When maintaining *and* reversing the distinction, the question becomes how semantics *affects* societal structure. This is primarily done in a descriptive way, but it also forms the backbone of the few remarks Luhmann does make on the efficiency or even the democratic value of political communication.

When observed in this way, the importance of the semantics of sovereignty lies in the fact that it has constituted *territorial segmentation*. Even though the semantics of sovereignty is rife with paradox, it has been a *sine qua non* for the establishment of the territorial segmentation that is clearly an existing form of differentiation in world society. Luhmann identifies three forms of differentiation in historical succession: segmentation (sometimes supplied by center/periphery), stratification and functional differentiation (cf. Luhmann 1997a: chapter 4). These forms of differentiation should be regarded as archeological layers piling on top of one another. Stating that modernity is the era of functional differentiation does not mean that functional differentiation is the *only* form of differentiation, just that it is the *primary* form of differentiation. The thesis of functional differentiation has proved amply provocative just the same, but it should at least be noted that the claim only stretches so far as to the primacy of a functional differentiation *enveloping territorial segmentation*.

Of course, the relationship between “international” systems and territorial segmentation has always been an issue of great concern in IR. But IR scholars have tended to see modernity as an era in which the primary form of differentiation is exclusive territorial segmentation between states (cf. Sassen 1996: 3). Consequently, any system exceeding territorial segmentation is seen as an entity developing slowly, gradually or even painfully – if at all – on the *basis* of territorial segmentation. Thus, IR has generated an avalanche of different international systems implying anything from mechanical automatism in the dispositions of states to normative integration. But in a sense, they have all been plagued by “the most basic theoretical problem associated with the principle of state sovereignty” (Walker 1993: 172).

For it is unclear how the principle of sovereign autonomy is compatible with the requirements of participation in the states-system. At one extreme, one can argue that the states-system is apolitical, that it is simply an automatic arrangement in which structural mechanisms respond to the assertions of autonomous states. ... At the other extreme, one can suggest that the states-system constitutes a kind of society to which states are somehow obligated, so that the principle of sovereignty is understood to be compatible with the emerging norms of international law. In this case an understanding of sovereignty as autonomous decisions requires considerable qualifications, and an insistence that participation is in fact a condition of possibility of autonomy rather than a threat to it.

(Walker 1993: 172)

From the systems theoretical point of view, the concept of the “international system” is itself one of unities concealing the paradox of politics in the semantics of sovereignty. Obviously, no system can arise on the basis of state sovereignty, since any notion of system negates the very idea of state sovereignty. Not even radical anarchy is a coherent claim about the world if one takes state sovereignty at face value, since it still implies an outside that may breach the internal sovereignty of the state. The term “international” in itself reflects this, since it literally designates a non-place on the “outside of the one unit that fills social space entirely” (Walker 1993: 175), i.e. the state. The beauty of Bull’s oxymoronic notion of an “Anarchical Society” is that it states this paradox blatantly, without so much as blinking. The “international system” is only an identity proposed within the semantics of sovereignty and consequently to be regarded as a form of *political* communication, strictly speaking (cf. Luhmann 1995b: 117, 2000a: 339; see also Albert 1999). From the perspective of Modern Systems Theory, systems can never be “international.” But they are definitely transnational.

### **Modernity as transnational**

In the systems theoretical view, territorial segmentation remains overarched by functional differentiation, which frames territorial segmentation as a question of the *internal differentiation* of the functional subsystems of world society. And this is what gives sovereignty its continuing importance. Generally speaking, *any territorial segmentation implies sovereignty* regardless of its paradoxical nature. Sovereignty remains important for as long as we have territorial segmentation. Only the claim that territorial segmentation is no longer an existing form of differentiation will make sovereignty something to be regarded only as a curiosity of old political texts. To clarify this point further, we have to introduce the systems theoretical distinction between functional subsystems of society and *organizations*.<sup>5</sup> Organizations are systems formed in the medium of decision, assigning membership (drawing the line of inclusion and exclusion), building programs and procedures for decision-making (cf. Luhmann 1997a: 826–847; see also



Albert and Hilkermeier's chapter in this volume). The notion of *programs* is very important in this context. Briefly stated, programs are semantics viewed as constitutive rather than belated in relation to societal structure. Programs are semantics viewed as constituting the emergence of organizations. Programs remain within the semantic realm, but attention is drawn to another aspect of semantics. Obviously paradoxification remains an option, but attention is drawn to the fact that the deparadoxification of the paradoxes of the greater functional systems may in fact constitute the emergence of social systems of another type, i.e. organizations.

The functional subsystems of world society use both organizations and interaction systems for their internal differentiation and are in this sense more or less dependent on them. Functional differentiation may be primary, but the functional subsystems still need organizations and interaction systems to work. From the perspective of organizations and interaction systems this implies that there is no "place" for these systems to operate outside the functional subsystems of world society, but also that they are free to direct their attention as they wish within world society. It is of course possible to ignore the functional subsystems of world society, but such a strategy is most likely to put a swift end to any further communication. Consequently, organizations direct their operations at the media and founding distinctions of the functional subsystems. Luhmann observes this development through the distinction between *code* and programs. Organizations develop programs oriented towards the distinctions of the functional subsystems of world society. From the perspective of organizations, these distinctions consequently emerge as codes that frame the basic direction of the programs that constitute organizations. In this sense, we may observe the semantics of sovereignty as programs on sovereignty. This does not do away with paradox, but draws attention to the organizations constituted by the semantics of sovereignty in spite of paradox. Semantics of sovereignty remain prone to paradox, but they still generate a reservoir of meaning from which organizations build programs.

The internal differentiation of the system of politics takes place through organization-building and the semantics of sovereignty underlies this internal differentiation as territorial segmentation. In other words, territorial segmentation always takes the form of territorial organization. The well-known concepts of (re)territorialization and (re)distribution of territory depend entirely on organization as a specific type of social system. Territorial organization has always proceeded by way of programs on sovereignty whereby the unities proposed by the semantics of sovereignty come to form the line of inclusion and exclusion in these organizations. This goes for both the Monarch, the people, or the public, but the primary line of inclusion and exclusion produced by the semantics of sovereignty is that of the national border which delimits "national decisions" (which is not to say that the decisions produced are collectively binding in a non-paradoxical way within each organization).

This is also what defines modernity as inherently transnational as well as global. The term globalization only designates the territorial inclusiveness of

functional subsystems. The term transnational designates the internal differentiation of functional subsystems. Obviously this reverses the old notion of the transnational, which took exclusive territoriality for granted as much as the concept of the international did. Here, the transnational designated relations or organizations crossing national borders (still stated most clearly in Keohane and Nye 1970; see also Risse-Kappen 1994, 1995a). Since this discussion was framed within IR, it tended to accept the semantics of sovereignty, resulting in yet another paradoxical figure, that of the “plus-sum game of sovereignty,” representing sovereignty as something quantifiable (cf. Huntington 1973). The systems theoretical point remains that the importance of the transnational arises from the fact that functional subsystems of world society historically have utilized national organizations for their internal differentiation to a very large degree.

Correspondingly the term “transnational” designates organizations which use the national border as a means of inclusion and exclusion within a functional subsystem of world society.<sup>6</sup> Functional subsystems have never been completely “denationalized” as one might suspect (cf. Beisheim *et al.* 1999). Even though dependence on national organization may vary immensely, *no functional subsystem of world society has yet found a way to do away with territorial or even national organization completely.* Even the two most widely accepted candidates for full denationalization – economy and media – rely on nationally based organizations. The system of economics still has national banks. True, the multinational corporation is a trademark of the economic system and has become the symbol of the power of mobility that contrasts territorial fixation, but the system of economics also uses national organization. The system of mass media still has nationally controlled media institutions: even regimes adhering to liberalism employ the notion of “public service” and therefore political control of the media. In totalitarian regimes national control seems even more apparent. In science, national boundaries still play an important role for many universities (cf. Luhmann 1995b). In sports, contests between national teams are still “the sublime” – even though we also have increased mobility and club teams without one single national player in the roster. And Schmitt’s remark on sovereignty was not far off the mark either (cf. Schmitt 1985 [1922]): of course the system of law also depends to a very high degree on national organization in the form of national courts.

Correspondingly, it is possible to observe claims to “economic” sovereignty (why else have a national bank?), media sovereignty (the right to educate or even “create” a public), sovereignty in sports (they are called “World Champions”), etc., even though this might take place by transference of the concept of sovereignty itself. But the one system historically most dependent on national organization remains the system of politics. It is important to notice however, that the territorial organizations within the system of politics are not states, publics or nations. Luhmann may state that states are “necessary regional addresses for a world society that has to fulfill the function of politics within itself” (Luhmann 1995b), but they are needed only as “semantic tricks” brought about by the different programs on sovereignty. Even though these programs make reference to state, public and nation, they do not constitute these entities as

operational social systems, even at the level of organization. The only organizations observable within the system of politics remain the administration, political parties (cf. Luhmann 1990b, 2000a) and, to some extent, the “audience” (*Publikum*).<sup>7</sup> The “state” does not refer to a distinctly observable organization, but only to an ensemble of political parties and administrations (and an array of interaction systems that emerges and disappears in a very short time). Political parties, administration and the “audience” have historically been national in the sense that they use national borders as the basic line of inclusion and exclusion and that they produce national decisions. In this way the system of politics has been very dependent upon national organization. But this may be about to change.

### **New programs on sovereignty and new organizations?**

Even though Modern Systems Theory finds the disappearance of the state to be anything but surprising, since it was never there, the end of sovereignty should not be announced too quickly. The crisis of sovereignty very often refers to the assumption that the utilization of the national border as a means of inclusion and exclusion can no longer serve as the basis for political control. But this only amounts to a crisis of administration and political parties. The flaw in the claim about the end of sovereignty is that sovereignty is equated with the historically most dominant organization brought about by the semantics of sovereignty: the national organization. But this does not rule out programs on sovereignty constituting other forms of territorial organization. Rather, the continuing importance of sovereignty resides in the fact that *any* territorial organization still implies sovereignty.

It is obvious that such a claim is not common to IR since it has always focused on *external* sovereignty as a trademark of territorial organization, ascribing it to the state alone. But this issue is less relevant to Modern Systems Theory since no organization has ever “had” external sovereignty. What is more important from a systems theoretical view is that sovereignty has aided other forms of territorial organization than exclusive national borders. Obvious examples are smaller organizations such as municipalities and local authorities. However, insofar as territorial organization is regarded as the basis of political control, it follows from the thesis about functional differentiation as the primary form of differentiation that political control in the classical sense was already “over” at the beginning of modernity. With functional differentiation, politics becomes just one system among others with no privileged access to the other functional subsystems of world society.

For a while sovereignty may in fact have produced a sufficient alternative in the sense that it made territorial organization the primary form of internal differentiation in several of the functional subsystems besides the political system, i.e. economics, law, science, media and even to some extent religion. This may not have provided political control in the sense that functional differentiation still “trumped” territorial segmentation, but it made a certain control

possible in the form of structural and operative couplings between the functional subsystems by way of territorial organization (on couplings, see Luhmann 1997a: 776–789; and especially Willke 1992, 1997). National banks, national courts, national universities, national TV and even national churches all used the same line of inclusion and exclusion and in this sense made for a relatively efficient coupling between these organizations and consequently between their “mother systems,” i.e. the functional subsystems of world society. Even though the political system did not become superior to other systems in this way, the tight couplings provided something resembling political control.<sup>8</sup>

In this view, the condition for political control, even though in a limited sense, is a matching territorial organization in the different functional subsystems of world society. The current lack of political control is consequently to be understood as a lack of symmetry. Such a lack of symmetry may come in two forms. The first form is simple asymmetry in the sense that the territorial organization of different functional subsystems is simply not the same. Here, political control comes to depend on a redistribution of territory within the political system to match other systems. The second form is a more radical asymmetry, where other functional subsystems are seen simply to not need territorial organization any more. But in neither case do we witness a disappearance of sovereignty.

In the case of simple asymmetry it hardly seems controversial to state that sovereignty still shows itself to be implied in territorial redistribution. The political system has responded to the development in other functional subsystems by attempting a redesign of the political territory to match other systems. Thus, the basic logic behind the new political regions, of which the EU is the most important, remains that reterritorialization in other systems needs to be countered by supranational administration (political parties not utilizing national boundaries would in fact be transnational in this terminology). Infamously, this has produced grave problems in constructing a new Sovereign for such an organization, since neither the state, the public nor the nation (or people, as stated by the German constitutional court) seem to provide plausible solutions in this respect. The attempt of the European constitutional convention seems to utilize the old gambit of the constitution, requiring some modifications of the traditional legal distinction between treaty and constitution. But the point remains that it does not seem possible to bypass the semantics of sovereignty in trying to perform the redistribution of territory wanted, however paradoxical this semantic may be.

The claim of a more radical asymmetry seems to lie behind the claim in the current diagnoses of world politics as deterritorialized “flows,” “networks” and “virtuality” (cf. Castells 1997; Hardt and Negri 2001; Der Derian 2001). In this view, the de- and reterritorialization in other functional subsystems proceeds with such a speed and flexibility that it can never be matched by the slow and painful building of supranational organizations. It would seem then, that the political is in crisis exactly because the territorial organization made possible by the semantics of sovereignty, however redistributed, no longer makes possible any form of political control. In this sense we have probably reached the end of sovereignty, which seems to be the conclusion drawn by Luhmann himself. But

even the more radical notions of deterritorialized flows and networks seem to accept that no global social system has yet done completely away with territorial organization. On the other hand, a recent work of great effect suggests that the systems of politics and law have actually been able to match any de- and reterritorialization in other functional subsystems of world society in the form of a new structure of “imperial right,” facilitated by the reinvention of a semantics of sovereignty making a boundless Empire the new Sovereign (Hardt and Negri 2001). Hardt and Negri may in this sense prove to be the most outspoken proponents for the continuing importance of sovereignty in a world society of flows and production of virtuality.<sup>9</sup>

In either case, sovereignty remains all but redundant as long as territorial organization remains an internal form of differentiation in world society, even though the scope and durability of any concrete differentiation may be changing. The importance of the systems theoretical perspective in this context is the double move of paradoxification and deparadoxification. The purpose of paradoxification is to dislodge the semantics of sovereignty and its many Sovereigns (state, public, nation, etc.) from the level of societal structure so as to observe these only as semantic responses to the paradox of unity within functional differentiation. The purpose of deparadoxification is to reintroduce sovereignty to the level of societal structure and avoid getting caught in the tragic carnival of a pure deconstructivism. It may be that sovereignty is rife with paradox and it may be that sovereignty does not constitute the *primary* form of differentiation in world society, but it still facilitates a form of differentiation, i.e. territorial segmentation. And since this form of differentiation also remains the only known basis for political control (democratically legitimate or not) in systems theory, there may be good reasons to work on new programs on sovereignty rather than celebrating the untimely and ultimately unwanted demise of sovereignty.

## Notes

- 1 At the level of societal structure, there is no postmodernity in systems theory. Postmodernism can only be viewed as a non-serious academic response to the real problems of functional differentiation. Luhmann talks about the “so-called” post-modern (cf. Luhmann 1997a).
- 2 Recalling Derrida’s designation of deconstruction as “generally practiced in two ways or two styles, although one most often grafts on to the other. One takes the demonstrative and apparently ahistorical allure of logico-formal paradoxes. The other more historical or more anamnestic seems to proceed through the reading of texts, meticulous interpretations and genealogies” (Derrida 1990: 957).
- 3 This distinction carries Luhmann’s analytical enterprise and defines this enterprise as constructivism insofar as the identity of what the case is and what lies behind is of course itself entirely paradoxical. Positivism may in this view be defined as the claim that what lies behind can actually be reduced to an internal moment in the domain of the concrete cases. The dialectical approach may be defined as the claim that any case can be reduced to an internal moment of what lies behind (cf. Luhmann 1993b).
- 4 The symbolically generalized medium presupposes other media, technological and non-technological, but it cannot be reduced to these. One might talk about an evolu-

tionary hierarchy of media ranging from meaning at the lowest level, past technological media such as dissemination media and through to symbolically generalized media at the top (cf. Andersen 2003).

- 5 In general, systems theory differentiates between society and its functional subsystems, organizations and interaction systems. Following Modern Systems Theory rigidly, there are no social systems to be found outside of this typology.
- 6 Actually, the term “transnational” is somewhat problematic, since the term “nation” is one of the obscure unities employed as a means of deparadoxification in the semantics of sovereignty. “Transterritorial” would probably be a more appropriate term. However, I shall stick to the term transnational due to the needs of deparadoxification, since the the term nation is *nonetheless* the primary way of designating the territorial boundaries that sovereignty helps to establish. Luhmann’s remark on the concept goes as follows:

World society offers few chances to build sufficiently big nation-states (Japan seems to be the most apperant case). ... Apparently the idea of the nation is a part of the stock of transhistoric semantic artefacts that proved fascinating for some time, without ever disclosing what system of society they referred to. Even though the idea is currently being phased out, it still does a good deal of damage by way of building *obstacles épistémologique* that block the necessary insights in sociology on the basis of former plausibilities.

(Luhmann 1997a: 1055).

- 7 The audience (*Publikum*) is not a public (*Öffentlichkeit*). The audience is not a stable organization, but a momentary “display of organisation needed to carry out political elections” (Luhmann 2000a: 253).
- 8 A note on “governance”: it follows that political control took the form of governance at the beginning of modernity and that the transition from “government to governance” was already accomplished with the breakthrough of functional differentiation as the primary form of differentiation.
- 9 Hardt and Negri offer this passing remark on systems theory while elaborating the political-legal structure of Empire: “We conceive the structure in a kind of intellectual shorthand as a hybrid of Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory and John Rawls’ theory of justice” (Hardt and Negri 2001: 13). The statement is somewhat baffling given the fact that it is not elaborated at all. But from the perspective of Modern Systems Theory, the constitution of Empire appears at least very logical, though not yet empirically sound. If there is to be political control in world society it would in some sense imply the constitution of Empire.

# 10 “World opinion” and the turn to post-sovereign international governance

*Hans-Martin Jaeger*

“[T]he only overwhelming force in the world,” Woodrow Wilson proclaimed during his domestic campaign for the League of Nations in September 1919, “is the force of opinion” (see Baker and Dodd 1927: vol. II, 256). Talk of world (or international) opinion had a heyday around the time of the founding of the League of Nations, and the President of the United States was not its first or only aficionado. Many others echoed his emphatic pronouncements. It was in “the regular reliable formation ... of public opinion among the different peoples,” according to one observer, that “the prime support of peaceful international relations” could be found (Hobson 1915: 210).

Exuberant statements like these prompted E.H. Carr’s (1946 [1939]: 26) acerbic critique of what he saw as the “utopian background” of “half-discarded nineteenth-century assumptions” underpinning the League of Nations. Concerning international opinion, this ostensible utopianism referred to the belief that public opinion, understood as the infallible expression of abstract reason, would demand general disarmament and make force largely dispensable in implementing decisions of the League (cf. Carr 1946 [1939]: 31–36). Having witnessed the League’s failure to intervene against the Japanese, Italian and German aggressions in the 1930s, it seemed to Carr that the reference to world opinion had become part of a “conventional phraseology” among League supporters, which “through constant repetition” had “lost all contact with reality” (Carr 1946 [1939]: 30), or which simply functioned as an ideological expression of Anglo-Saxon dominance in international relations (cf. Carr 1946 [1939]: 79–88).

While Carr’s impatience with the more extravagant claims on behalf of world opinion is understandable, the contact with reality of his own assertions about understandings of world opinion in the context of early twentieth-century efforts toward international organization has gone largely unchallenged. The analysis of the semantics of world opinion presented below raises a number of questions in this regard. It shows that the invocation of international opinion expressed a new political rationality for international governance rather than abstract reason or a mere rationalization of state power; that the reference to world opinion was not necessarily construed in opposition to the collective use of force; that “world opinion” was less detached from “present” issues of international governance

than Carr’s “utopian” label suggests; and that its social significance went beyond its Anglo-Saxonism.

Drawing on Niklas Luhmann’s historical sociology of “societal structure and semantics” (*Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik*) in connection with elements of his systems theory and Michel Foucault’s approach to the study of government (“governmentality”), this chapter argues that “world opinion” emerged as a medium of communication in the context of the founding of the League of Nations. “World opinion” came to underwrite possibilities for new forms of international governance, including procedures of arbitration and inquiry, collective security, and the mandates regime. It implied social distinctions on the basis of “civilization” and “great-power” status, as well as suggestions of “representative” institutions for international politics. As a medium of communication, “world opinion” augured a transition from a sovereignty-based model of public opinion and government to forms of “post-sovereign” international governance, thereby overlaying the segmentary differentiation of the political system of world society (in terms of nation states) with elements of stratification and functional differentiation. These claims will be developed in three steps: an outline of the approach of “societal structure and semantics”; a brief sketch of nineteenth-century conceptions of public opinion with respect to international affairs; and an overview of dimensions of “world opinion” in the context of the emerging League of Nations.

### “Societal structure and semantics”

Transitions in the realm of ideas and concepts indicate and accompany transitions in the organization of society. Luhmann’s historical sociology examines this relationship in terms of correlations (and limits of correlations) between social-structural and conceptual transformations, between societal structure and semantics. It employs conceptual (*begriffsgeschichtliche*) analyses of “cultivated semantics” (prominent forms of knowledge or ideas) in connection with a systems-theoretical interpretation of (world) society. As a self-description of society, semantics is indicative, and sometimes co-constitutive, of the differentiation and evolution of society and its subsystems. Conversely, the form of differentiation of society enables and limits semantic changes.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike materialist or structural approaches, a historical sociology along the lines of “societal structure and semantics” does not attribute ideas to the interests of groups, classes, states, or related material structures. The connectivity (*Anschlussfähigkeit*) of any given idea (e.g., “world opinion”) exceeds the interests and identities of particular collectivities and transcends the implied causalities of material structures; hence, the meaning of the idea cannot be reduced to them. Conversely, unlike ideational approaches, Luhmann’s historical sociology does not treat ideas as disembodied forces. As symptoms, necessary concomitants, and constitutive elements of the organization and differentiation of society and its subsystems, ideas are not separate from but part and parcel of functional innovations and structural changes.<sup>2</sup>



Changes in semantics respond to problems generated by the complexity and the form of differentiation of a social system. Complexity creates pressures for selectivity, i.e. for simplifications or aggregations in societal self-descriptions and organization. System differentiation refers to the formation of subsystems, which make certain lines in the selection of self-descriptions more plausible than others. Luhmann singles out three major forms of system differentiation: segmentation (similar or equal units); stratification (unequal strata in a hierarchy); and functional differentiation (functional contexts of communication) (cf. Luhmann 1980: 21–35; cf. 1997a: 609–618). The emergence of the semantics of world opinion then can be understood as a response to problems, and as in turn providing indications, of organization and differentiation in early twentieth-century world society and its political system. The conceptual analysis of “world opinion” will identify these problems as well as indications of possibilities of governance, temporal structures, and the form(s) of differentiation in world society and its political system at this juncture.

At the most basic level, conceptual analysis is concerned with meaning. Meaning organizes the selectivity necessitated by complexity. From the perspective of Modern Systems Theory, meaning is neither an emanation from a subject, nor is it determined by attributes of the world. Rather, meaning operates through the selective processing of information on the basis of differences. Meaning actualizes a particular designation against a horizon of other possibilities. Meaning thus always points beyond itself: to other themes or objects, to other times (past or future), and to the relation of other people to it. Accordingly, the following conceptual analysis will (analytically) decompose “world opinion” into thematic (*sachliche*), temporal, and social dimensions of meaning (see Luhmann 1980: 35–41; 1995a: chapter 2). More specifically, in nineteenth and early-twentieth century discourse on international organization, we are interested in:

- the purposes and policies ascribed to world opinion (thematic dimension);
- the temporal horizons of “world opinion” in the past and the future, as well as their connections to the present (temporal dimension); and
- the social and institutional forms, as well as inclusions and exclusions associated with “world opinion” (social dimension).

The sources considered include: proposals for international organization in the nineteenth century and in the period between 1914 and 1919; contemporaneous writings and memoirs of participants at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, and particularly the League of Nations Commission; the proceedings of the latter, as well as related preparatory and official documents.<sup>3</sup>

### **“Public opinion” and international affairs in the nineteenth century**

In part prepared by late eighteenth-century peace plans, such as Kant’s and Bentham’s, and owing to its currency in domestic political debates in the wake of

the Enlightenment, “public opinion” had become an established term of reference for international affairs in Europe by the early nineteenth century. While the statesmen of Napoleon’s and Metternich’s Europe were acutely aware of the significance of public opinion for the conduct of foreign affairs (see Osiander 1994: 189–194), much of the impetus for the semantic evolution of “public opinion” concerning international politics stemmed from a reaction against the Napoleonic wars by an emerging transnational peace movement.<sup>4</sup> And however deficient public opinion may have been in its empirical manifestations (e.g. in actual enthusiasm for wars), it was essentially seen as a force for peace in connection with international law and prospective international organizations.

James Mill (1967 [1825]: 6–7, 27–28) argued that “the only power” the “civilized world” could resort to “for any considerable sanction to the laws of nations” was the “approbation or disapprobation ... of the rest of mankind.” Echoing Mill, William Ladd wrote:

[E]ven now, *public opinion* is amply sufficient to enforce all the decisions of a Court of Nations, ... and public opinion is daily obtaining more power. If an Alexander, a Caesar, a Napoleon, have bowed down to public opinion, what may we not expect of better men, when public opinion becomes more enlightened? ... Already there is no civilized nation that can withstand the frown of public opinion. It is therefore necessary, only to enlighten public opinion still farther, to insure the success of our plan.

(Ladd 1916 [1840]: 77)

Mill’s and Ladd’s statements encapsulate important aspects of the thematic, temporal, and social dimensions of “public opinion” with respect to international relations in the nineteenth century. They relate “public opinion” to the enforcement of international jurisdiction, project it into the past as well as a supposedly brighter future, and confine its purview to “civilized” nations. Let us briefly consider these three aspects.

Thematically, “public opinion” could take on three distinct but related functions. First, public opinion was envisaged as a constituent power for international law and organization. It would pressure governments to establish an international court and congress. Second, after “jurisdictional” and “legislative” international institutions had been established, public opinion (rather than military force) would act as the “executive” of an imagined international division of powers. As a “secret sovereign” (Luhmann 1990d: 170) it would sanction international law and enforce the verdicts of international jurisdiction. Third, rather than as a constituent power or executive supplement for international law, public opinion could also be conceived as an alternative to international law and institutions. Once individual consciences had been swayed to the cause of peace, an international congress and tribunal would be dispensable.<sup>5</sup>

The temporalization of “public opinion” concerning international affairs was probably the most important aspect of its conceptual development in the nineteenth century. It was the inscription of “public opinion” in the past and its

projection into the future that guaranteed its relevance for the present. Ladd's claim about Alexander's, Caesar's, and Napoleon's supposed bowing to "public opinion" notwithstanding, the more common form of the historical inscription of "public opinion" was negative. Older peace plans, like Sully's *Grand Dessin*, had relied on force to bind nations together; now was the dawn of a different age in which the rule of force would be replaced by the rule of public opinion (see Cooper 1976: 139–140; Linden 1987: 394). Complementing the inscription of public opinion into the past – positive and negative alike – was its uniformly positive projection into the future. Whether or not public opinion had been powerful in the past, it would assert itself as a force for peace in the future. "[A]s they are strenuously disapproved of by public opinion," one peace activist contended in 1867, "all wars will be prevented, if not at present, at least in the near future" (see Linden 1987: 637). However, the golden future of public opinion would only come if public opinion were further educated and reformed by the friends of peace. Although public opinion was the "ultimate reason" governing the world, it still had to be "enlightened in its masses" (Cooper 1976: 63–64, cf. 122, 238; see also Linden 1987: 275, 689, 798).

"Public opinion" then was presented in a paradoxical form: on the one hand, it was inherently reasonable and peaceful; on the other hand, it had to be changed to become reasonable and peaceful. This paradox was unfolded through the "education" of public opinion. Education was initially understood as missionary work: enlightenment (somewhat ironically) was to occur through the gospel. Gradually, the enlightenment of the masses by way of Masses gave way to more modern forms of education relying, for example, on the presentation of statistical information on the costs of war. The denunciation of war with educational intent changed "from a painful cry of outraged Christianity to a violation of intelligent political economy" (Cooper 1976: 381, cf. 27, 109, 145, 468ff; cf. Linden 1987: 48–49, 51, 83, 97, 350).

It remains to consider the social distinctions built into "public opinion" concerning international relations. Who was "the public" in question? To whom was public opinion applicable? Who was excluded by it? The most deeply ingrained social categorization in the context of "public opinion" and international relations in the nineteenth century was that of "civilization." Public opinion appeared as both product and producer of civilization (see Mill 1962a [1836]), and accordingly, it was expected to have its beneficial effects among "civilized nations."

However, "civilization" also marked the boundary of "public opinion" by defining a subordinate "uncivilized" other. The boundary was defined by overlapping criteria of Christianity, respect for the rule of law (constitutional and international), "Europeanness," and especially nationhood. According to John Stuart Mill (1962b [1859]: 406), "barbarians" had "no rights as a *nation*." Therefore criticisms of French and British colonial conduct were mistaken, if they invoked international law. "[A]mong civilized peoples, members of an equal community of nations, like Christian Europe," intervention in the civil war of another state had "passed into a maxim of ... international law." *Vis-à-vis* "non-

civilized” peoples, on the other hand, it could “seldom ... be either judicious or right” for a country with a free government, “to assist, *otherwise than by the moral support of its opinion*, the endeavours ... to extort the same blessing from its native rulers” (Mill 1962b [1859]: 407–408, 411, emphasis added). What Mill intended as an argument against a “civilizing” intervention by virtue of international law thus inadvertently turned into an argument for a “civilizing” intervention by virtue of public opinion. The colonial world then was simultaneously excluded from “civilized public opinion” and included by “civilizing public opinion.”

Despite its “civilizational” reach and colonial “outreach,” the “public” of “public opinion” remained distinctively national at the same time. Nationhood, the “rights as a *nation*,” constituted the common denominator of the religious, juridico-political, and geographical boundaries of “civilization.” Adding to the national/civilizational duality of “public opinion” was a growing awareness of the internal heterogeneity of national public opinion. Internal differentiations of (national) “public opinion” played an important role in connection with the perceived need for its education. The question was: who was educating whom? The answers varied. Some favored targeting the middle classes so that peaceful sentiment would percolate both upwards and downwards from them. Others wanted to reach “the masses,” workers, or women (see Cooper 1976: 29–33, 109; Linden 1987: 98, 287–288, 348–350, 414, 699–700).

What these differentiations of “public opinion” in terms of classes, masses versus elites, or gender showed was that the enlightened future of public opinion could only begin if the present was organized in terms of a stratified social order which enabled the enlightened (few) to bring the light to the ignorant (many). The internal stratification of “public opinion” and the external distinction between “civilized” and “uncivilized” nations were permutations of each other. The “civilized–uncivilized” dichotomy could be copied into the nation, just like the internal stratification between givers and receivers of enlightenment could be copied into international relations. And both of these asymmetric dichotomies were preconditions for the expected progress of public opinion. Together, the national/civilizational duality and the internal differentiation of “public opinion” indicate the coexistence of segmentary differentiation (among “civilized” nation states) with various modes of stratification (“civilized” versus “uncivilized,” “elites” versus “masses,” etc.) in nineteenth-century world politics.

### **“World opinion” and the founding of the League of Nations**

This section illustrates how “world opinion” emerged as a medium of communication in international politics in symbiosis with the founding of the League of Nations and in response to early twentieth-century problems of world-societal differentiation. As a medium of communication, “world opinion” made possible novel forms of international governance through the League of Nations. These included arbitration and inquiry, collective security, labor issues, and the mandates regime (while excluding an international army and disarmament).<sup>6</sup>

“World opinion” became firmly rooted in the present, which necessitated a new self-propagating conception of its education. Despite indications of an emerging functional differentiation of the political system of world society, segmentary and stratified modes of differentiation remained pervasive.

### ***Problems of world–societal differentiation***

By the early twentieth century, “public opinion” concerning international affairs had become “world opinion.” “The world” was now understood as a single social system. This was reflected in a proliferation of “world”-prefixed phenomena beyond those known since the nineteenth century (e.g., “world literature,” “world history”). “World crises,” including “world war,” called for the restoration of “world peace.” The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 took place before a “world audience” represented by the “world press” (see League to Enforce Peace [LEP] 1918: 138; Bonsal 1944: 16). The world war was symptomatic of a number of interrelated problems of world–societal differentiation to which “world opinion” offered a “solution.” Three such problems stand out.

First, “world opinion” responded to a differentiation lag in world politics *vis-à-vis* other domains. While economy and finance, science and medicine, the press and sports had become organized on a world scale in accordance with functional considerations, political activities continued to be ordered on the basis of seemingly obsolescent principles of national independence and territorial sovereignty. It was felt that this differentiation disparity involved great dangers for international crisis management. Along with international organization, “world opinion” was to serve as a device to bridge this differentiation disparity. It was expected to be the catalyst for realigning the as-yet-territorial differentiation in world politics with the functional differentiation of economic, scientific and other activities (see Woolf 1916: 99–100, 128, 171, 267; Angell 1918: 60–61).

Second, frequent demands were made for a transition from the “balance of power” to “world opinion” (see Day 1952: 237; Baker and Dodd 1927: vol. I, 234). The “balance of power” not only symbolized the teetering tradition of European diplomacy, but also represented an outdated mechanical worldview. In place of mechanical balances, it seemed imperative to rely not only on international *organization*, but also on “that larger moral *organism* ... in politics, the international mind” (Hobson 1915: 85–87, 211, my emphasis; cf. Brailsford 1915: 151–153). One might read the call for overcoming the “balance of power” through “world opinion” then as a quasi-Durkheimian demand for a transition from mechanical to organic solidarity, and accordingly, from a segmentary to a functional mode of differentiation in world politics (see Durkheim 1965 [1893]: 174–190).

Third, the First World War was experienced as an unprecedented crisis of “civilization,” and “world opinion” was part of the response to this crisis. The crisis presented two distinct challenges: German militarism and Russian Bolshevism. “Civilization” was the antidote to the alleged superiority of *Kultur*. The “civilizational” serum contained nineteenth-century ingredients, which

went hand in hand with appeals to “world opinion”: international organization, respect for international law, and a belief in progress (see Zimmern 1971 [1916]: 221–225; Baker and Dodd 1927: vol. I, 330, vol. II, 9, 54–55, 363). “World opinion” itself was the antidote to “world revolution.” However, Bolshevism provoked two conflicting impulses. On the one hand, “world revolution” signified a version of “civilizational” progress competing with “world opinion”; on the other hand, Bolshevism appeared antithetical to progress, thus necessitating “world opinion” as the “savior” of “civilization” (see Barraclough 1964: 113–117; Temperley 1920–1924: vol. VI, 579–580).

### ***The emergence of “world opinion” as a medium of communication***

In plans for the League of Nations, it was an almost axiomatic assumption that the new international organization needed the support of “world opinion”: a “concert of peace” required a “partnership of opinion” (see Day 1952: 246; cf. also Brailsford 1915: 171–172). Though presupposed in the institutional designs of the League, “world opinion” still appeared to be absent in political reality. The solution to the quandary was the postulate of a virtuous circle: the new “political machinery” would be “a factor in the development of public opinion, as well as a form of its expression” (Angell 1918: 3; see also British Documents on Foreign Affairs [BDEFA] 1989–1991: vol. IV, 187). “World opinion” would instantiate itself in the shadow of the new international organization. The catalytic moment for the autopoiesis of “world opinion” was the Paris Peace Conference, which Wilson hailed as “*the first conference in which decisions depended upon the opinion of mankind*” rather than on “diplomatic schemes” (see Miller 1928: vol. I, 41–42).

The actual restrictions on publicity at the Peace Conference notwithstanding (see Temperley 1920–1924: vol. VI, 559), the virtuous circle of “world opinion” and the catalytic moment of Paris opened a space for the emergence of “world opinion” as a medium of international governance. Just as the seeds for the emergence of “public opinion” were planted with the centralization of authority in the absolutist state (see Koselleck 1988: chapters 1–2), “world opinion” became possible at the moment when authority was symbolically centralized at the international level. However, while “public opinion” may initially have been the product of a (bourgeois public’s) sphere of social interaction (see Habermas 1989), “world opinion” *ab initio* operated as a medium of communication in a complex system: it became available as a semantic device, which enhanced the chance for the continuity of communication (i.e. the acceptance of forms of communication as premises for further communication – whether affirmative or negative) even in the absence of a consensus in the political system of world society.

More precisely, this chapter suggests that “world opinion” emerged as a *secondary* symbolically generalized medium of communication alongside and in conjunction with the pre-existing power medium. Similar to the latter, “world

opinion” could henceforth extend the understanding of world-political communication, i.e. it could enhance the probability that even “uncomfortable” (e.g., jingoistic) communications were accepted as premises for further communication.<sup>7</sup> More specifically, “world opinion” came to condense and create (as well as dissolve and exclude) particular forms of international governance by supplying variable but relatively stable themes, temporalities, and social distinctions. The following is an overview of some of these forms.

### ***Towards post-sovereign international governance in the medium of “world opinion”***

*Vis-à-vis* the nineteenth-century semantics of public opinion concerning international affairs, the thematic dimension of “world opinion” changes both quantitatively and qualitatively with the consolidation of “world opinion” as a medium. The nineteenth-century enforcement or executive functions of “public opinion” for international law appear relatively narrow and legalistic from the perspective of the early twentieth century. By including arbitration, inquiry and collective security on the one hand, as well as labor and colonial issues on the other, the thematic agenda of “world opinion” expands and partly emancipates itself from the connection with international law. While the former set of issues retained a connection with the “secretly sovereign” enforcement of international law, “world opinion” began to turn away from this form to post-sovereign forms of government. The supposed operation of “public opinion” as an extension of international law was supplemented by the expected operation of “world opinion” as an extension of scientific knowledge; concerns with “property rights” over territories by concerns with the management and welfare of populations; legal regulation by material regulation (or perhaps, “repressive” law by “co-operative” law; cf. Durkheim 1965 [1893]: 111–132) (see Foucault 1991). Let us consider these developments in some more detail.

The procedures of arbitration, inquiry and collective security were the principal instruments of the League of Nations Covenant for peaceful conflict resolution, and “world opinion” was the central rationale behind these instruments. The delay afforded by the submission of a dispute to an international tribunal or commission of inquiry would allow for the formation of “world opinion” on the controversy, and with the fresh memory of the horrors of the First World War, “world opinion” was likely to be “aroused and organized on the side of peace.” To this end the League Council would “inform and guide public opinion correctly as to the dispute and so enable it to mobilize its forces” for peace (Miller 1928: vol. II, 53–54, 57–58; see also Dickinson 1915b: 31–35, 1917: 181–182). The information and guidance of “world opinion” entailed a peculiarly “scientific” understanding of the process of inquiry itself. One observer explicitly advised that the “temperament” of the investigators in the Council “would need to be scientific”; “scientific politics” had to substitute “sentimental politics.” Inquiry was *taylored* as an example of “scientific management of ... nations” with (new) diplomats as “international efficiency experts”

(Goldsmith 1917: 50, 52, 55, 114). Since experts could arrive at a “correct” assessment of an international conflict independently of an actual world public, the procedure of inquiry represented a process of vicarious opinion formation. Like symbolically generalized media of communication, “world opinion” could thereby ensure the continuity of communication even in the absence of a “world-societal consensus” or in the face of “uncomfortable” (e.g. war-mongering) communications.

Although the relationship between “world opinion” and collective security was sometimes portrayed as an opposition (see Cosmos 1917: 96–99, 102–103), it was more commonly held that “world opinion” would in fact be harnessed to the working of collective security. “World opinion” itself demanded the “element of force” in the new international organization, and if a state resorted to war without regard for arbitration and inquiry, it had to “be whipped into ... conformity with the public opinion of the world” (Latané 1932: vol. II, 775; LEP 1918: 17).

However, “world opinion” was not only a facilitating factor but also a limit for collective security. This is demonstrated by the rejection of the French proposal to create an international army for the enforcement of collective security (see Miller 1928: vol. I, 256–259, vol. II, 295, 297, 321, 479, 573, 576–577). The operation of “world opinion” as a medium for collective security was predicated on the latency of the collective organization of force. Otherwise it would have appeared that – “civilization” forbid – “we were substituting international militarism for national militarism” (Miller 1928: vol. II, 294). Moreover, the operation of “world opinion” as a medium of collective security involved the slighting of actual expressions of opinion in favor of the French proposal (cf. Miller 1928: vol. II, 710–711). Ironically, this enabled or even necessitated the continuation of “national militarism.” If collective security eschewed collective military organization, it had to rely on the militaries of the League’s member states.<sup>8</sup>

Hence, while indications for a transcendence of the nineteenth-century model of the “secret sovereignty” of public opinion can be seen in the “scientific” procedures of arbitration and inquiry, collective security – in its reliance on national military organization – remained wedded to a model of sovereignty. The post-sovereign quality of “world opinion”-mediated international governance comes more clearly into focus in the forms of labor rights and the mandates regime.

According to John Dewey (1954 [1927]: 62), one “mark of the public is indicated by the idea that children and other dependents (such as the insane, the permanently helpless) are peculiarly its wards.” In varying degrees of peculiarity for varying kinds of “helplessness,” this is also true of the public, which imagined itself through the semantics of world opinion circa 1919. The principal wards for “world opinion” were workers and colonial populations. Only the latter will be considered here.

Under the League of Nations Covenant, the legacies of the Ottoman Empire and German imperialism became “mandates” of the new international organization: on behalf of the League, “advanced nations” were to administer and exercise “tutelage” over the former colonies, whose peoples were “not yet able to



stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world” (Article 22). The administration of the former colonies was to proceed in accordance with the “safeguards which enlightened public opinion demand[ed]” (BDEA 1989–1991: vol. IV, 192–193; cf. Temperley 1920–1924: vol. VI, 502). These included freedom of conscience and religion (but not of expression, assembly, and publication) “subject only to the maintenance of public order and morals”; the prohibition of the slave trade, arms traffic and liquor traffic; and “equal opportunities for ... trade and commerce” for all League members in the mandated territories (Article 22). Thus, blending neo-colonial ambitions with certain charitable and reformatory (but equally paternalistic) impulses, “world opinion” provided a crucial governmental rationale of the mandates regime under the League. The orphans of empire were to be adopted as wards of “world opinion.” The “care” given by the mandatory powers as “trustees responsible in the forum of the world” was meant to ensure the “welfare” of modernity-challenged peoples, so that their lives were “kept clean and safe and wholesome” (Baker and Dodd 1927: vol. I, 601–602; cf. Miller 1928: vol. II, 564).

Despite its neo-colonial flavor, the wardship of “world opinion” effectively warded off the more overtly imperialist designs of some of the British dominions, which had demanded direct annexations of nearby colonial territories (see Miller 1928: vol. II, 204–215).<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note that the demands for direct annexation were couched in terms similar to the “welfarist” ones of “world-opinion” wardship: annexation would speed up the “development of the territories concerned,” which “would be better for the European ... and ... the native races” (Miller 1928: vol. II, 206). Just as “world opinion” then did not escape the bind of colonialism, neo-colonial demands did not escape the bind of “world opinion’s” wardship form. *Pace* Carr, this indicates that the “world opinion” of the Peace Conference was neither the unpractical expression of a liberal utopia nor a pure rationalization of the national interests of the powerful. Rather, with the mandates regime, “world opinion” aspired to instantiate the “civilizing” mission of the nineteenth century as a form of international governance, whereby “care” for the “civilizationally” needy became an essential ingredient in the generation of inter-governmental power and organization (cf. Foucault 1994: 80–93; Hindess 1996: 118–123).

### ***The present-ation of “world opinion”***

Whereas international “public opinion” had been the wave of the future in the nineteenth century, “world opinion” arrived on the shore of the present in the early twentieth century. The present-ation of “world opinion” in part resulted from the invention of a new, more recent, more concrete, and mostly negative past of “world opinion.” The preferred periods of reference were the Congress of Vienna and the ensuing Concert of Europe. What had happened since 1815 was the “emergence into clear consciousness of an international mind,” which had replaced “the vague and somewhat sentimental cosmopolitanism” of that time (Hobson 1915: 196–197, 199). The Concert of Europe had been a step in

the right direction, but as a diplomatic body “meeting in secret” it had been “removed from all possibility of popular control” (Dickinson 1915b: 32, 1917: 181; cf. BDEFA 1989–1991: vol. IV, 137). The (re-)invention of the nineteenth-century past of “world opinion” made possible the presentation of “world opinion” as a radical novelty (see Miller 1928: vol. I, 41–43; Baker 1960 [1922]: vol. I, 100–101, 116–117, 121). “World opinion” marked off the prospects of a peaceful present (and future) of international cooperation from a negative past of secret diplomacy, narrow national interests, and the balance of power.

The presentation of “world opinion” did not make the latter’s education dispensable according to early twentieth-century observers. However, as the temporal index of “world opinion” moved from the future (through the past) to the present, religious or scientific instruction gave way to more reflexive, self-organizing processes of education. Individual and social capacities for self-education had to be cultivated. Rather than “filling an empty skull with the accumulated knowledge of past ages,” education was conceived as “a process of training human faculties” – memory, judgment, will, and conscience (Goldsmith 1917: 20; cf. Dickinson 1914–15: 42–43, 1915a: 36, 1915b: 35). What “the general public” needed was not literal revelation (“the inculcation of a gospel”), but a relevant literacy (“instruction in an alphabet”) (Burns 1920: vi). The education of “world opinion” became a self-propagating process. Each individual was an address for the education of “world opinion” through self-education. And self-education would facilitate the kind of self-regulation and self-control which were necessary to sustain post-sovereign forms of international governance (e.g., individuals governing themselves in accordance with the League Council’s expert opinions).

### ***“World opinion” and system differentiation in world politics***

The semantics of world opinion in the early twentieth century points to a continued segmentation in world politics. However, compared to the nineteenth century, segmentary differentiation now manifested itself in terms of the aggregation of domestic public opinions composed of individuals rather than in terms of the collective opinion of “civilized” states composed of different strata. Moreover, segmentary differentiation is more explicitly overlaid by elements of stratification (e.g., “great” versus “small” powers), and by an incipient functional differentiation (expressed in terms of representative institutions of “world opinion”).

“World opinion” did not refer to “the opinion of Governments only, but [to] the instructed and enlightened opinion of the people” living under these governments (Cosmos 1917: 104). In conformity with its self-propagating education, “public opinion” counted “in proportion to the number of convinced individuals” composing it in every nation (Dickinson 1914–15: 8, cf. 43), and the convinced individuals increasingly had to include women as well as men (see Royden 1915). Moreover, just like “world revolution” was to begin with the victory of the proletariat of each country over its bourgeoisie, “world opinion”

presupposed the victory of the public opinion of each country over its diplomacy. Diplomacy was too concerned with “the temporary interests of governments” rather than with “the permanent interests of peoples” (Buxton 1915: 57; cf. Angell 1918: 19, 106–107, 120–121). The understanding of “world opinion” as an aggregation of national public opinions shows the persistence of a political system differentiated into nation states. However, to the extent that diplomacy is identified with this differentiation, its opposition to “public opinion” points beyond it.

The public opinions of all states were not equal. It was the “public opinion” of (certain) “great powers” which particularly mattered (see Burns 1920: 14; Brailsford 1917: 296). Even attempted remedies for the disadvantaged “smaller powers” *vis-à-vis* the “great powers” in the name of an all-inclusive “world opinion” only re-inscribed the distinction (see Miller 1928: vol. I, 152–153, 161–162; Bourne 1971 [1916]: 256). Accordingly, Wilson was reproached with having abandoned “international democracy” in favor of “international aristocracy” at Paris (Lansing 1921: 58, 139, 273). International aristocracy not only appeared in the guise of “great-power” predominance, but also under the familiar designation of “civilization.” However, “civilization” now encompassed so many disparate criteria (from technological development to social reform) that the category had all but dispersed, and perhaps this very indeterminacy gave it continued plausibility as a dimension of stratification. Culturally, “civilization” often had a distinctly American flavor. The USA provided a historical, socio-logical, and political template for “world opinion.” The Declaration of Independence had invoked “a decent respect to the opinions of mankind,” and by 1915 “America ... in the make-up of her population” and “the liberality of her ideas ... possesse[d] ... a larger measure of the international mind than any other nation” according to one observer (Hobson 1915: 161; see also Day 1952: 241–242). Although this kind of magnifying glass thinking was partly an American peculiarity, its stratifying implications were not lost on other observers, who detected in it “an Anglo-Saxon hegemony disguised as humanitarianism.”<sup>10</sup>

Indications of an incipient functional differentiation in world politics – a differentiation, that is, between the states system, international institutions, and a public sphere – first manifested themselves in the demand that international relations should be brought “under the control of public opinion operating through representative institutions” (Hobson 1915: 65; cf. Baker and Dodd 1927: vol. I, 377). “World opinion” would supply the themes for decisions in representative international institutions. Conversely, such a “system of representation” would “give play ... to opinions ... cut[ting] across the lines of nationality”: the “balance of power” would yield to a “balance of opinions”; foreign affairs would be “no longer foreign” (Brailsford 1917: 313–314; cf. Lippmann 1915: 194–195). However, specific proposals for a representative embodiment of “world opinion” invariably referred to bodies representative of particular *national* public opinions (political parties, trade unions, etc.) (see Miller 1928: vol. I, 231–235, 274, vol. II, 218, 272–273, 300–302, 305, 562). Hence,

the incipient functional differentiation in world politics through representative institutions of “world opinion” ultimately merged back into a segmentary differentiation. Moreover, representation for “non-civilized” populations of colonial territories never came into consideration, which punctured all aspirations towards representation by a dimension of stratification.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has illustrated how “world opinion” emerged as a medium of communication in international politics in the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Without a general international organization in the nineteenth century, the “secret sovereignty” of (international) “public opinion” remained a pre-adaptive semantic advance without repercussions for the singularity (and “public sovereignty”) of the power medium or for segmentary differentiation in world politics. By condensing a number of novel thematic, temporal, and social forms, “world opinion” began to operate as a medium for a post-sovereign modernization of international governance in connection with the founding of the League of Nations. While this modernization pointed towards an internal functional differentiation in the political system of world society (states system, international institutions, public sphere), an international public sphere had not materialized by 1919.

Contrary to Carr, “world opinion” in the early League of Nations context signified less a utopian expression of abstract reason than a practical expression of a post-sovereign political rationality (quasi-scientific procedures of conflict resolution, “wardship” for postcolonial populations, and a self-propagating peace education). Though partly indicative of an Anglo-American ideological hegemony, “world opinion” operated less as a conveyor belt of military and economic state power than as a facilitator of a burgeoning (inter-) governmentalization of world politics, i.e. a form of power harnessing individuals, populations and states to, alternately, disciplinary and reformatory practices of international organization.

Given its governmental features, “world opinion” would also be misunderstood as expressing some kind of “democratic” consensus of an “international community.” In fact, in the early League context “world opinion” often neutralized actual expressions of popular opinion in favor of a vicarious opinion formation among experts. To the extent that the emerging medium of “world opinion” foreshadowed an international public sphere, it provided not for an infusion of morality into the political system from “civil society,” but rather for the self-referential closure of the political system of world society. The international public sphere on the horizon of early twentieth-century “world opinion” is a functional subsystem of the political system of world society and therefore part of a governmental logic of world politics, rather than promising a pristine repository for an emancipatory politics that evades the strictures of modernity.

“World opinion” might be seen as an evolutionary phenomenon in a political system that can no longer be described in terms of a power competition between

segmented nation state units alone, while not yet having differentiated a more sensitive, functional structure. Coupled with forms of international governance, “world opinion” determines what is seen and what is not seen in the political system of world society. If the power medium supplies collectively binding decisions as the primary function of politics according to Modern Systems Theory, it might be suggested that “world opinion” supplies visibility (and perhaps accountability) as a secondary function of the political system of world society. In terms of a historical and theoretical trajectory, “world opinion” might simulate social contexts, which describe themselves as public spheres, with internal differentiations, i.e. inclusions and exclusions of particular collectivities. In this perspective, the power medium might increasingly rely on the thematic structure supplied by “world opinion” and on the transparency provided by a public sphere (cf. Nassehi 2002: 45–47).

## Notes

- 1 For the approach of *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik* and various “applications” see Luhmann 1980, 1981b, 1989a, 1995b and 1986a.
- 2 Correlations between societal structure and semantics then do not imply causal claims: ideas are neither simple reflections of societal structure, nor do they determine it. Causality might lie in the dependence on ideas in general rather than the content of specific ideas (cf. Luhmann 1980: 7–8). To the extent that an “autonomous” evolution of ideas occurs, its “preadaptive advances” will only be viable, if the societal structure “catches up” with them (see Luhmann 1980: 20–21, 1997a: 539–540, 556, 883–884).
- 3 While the analysis focuses on contributions of Anglo-American provenance, the proceedings of the League of Nations Commission show that the idiom of world opinion was widely shared.
- 4 Beginning in Great Britain and the United States, the movement gained momentum all over Europe and Latin America in the course of the nineteenth century (see Linden 1987).
- 5 See Linden 1987: 42, 47, 51, 85, 139, 186, 309–310, 394, 633, 665, 917; Cooper 1976: 130, 136, 140, 142, 201, 297; Hinsley 1963: 94–95, 102–103, 106, 112–113.
- 6 Also excluded were issues of “racial equality” and economic issues, but they will not be considered here.
- 7 On symbolically generalized media of communication, see Luhmann 1995b: 161–163; 1997a: 316–396. For the theorization of “public opinion” as a medium see Luhmann 1990e.
- 8 Accordingly, disarmament was largely excluded from the purview of “world opinion” in the context of the emerging League (see Robertson 1918: 9).
- 9 Granted, the administration of the (“C”) mandates in question as “integral portions” of the mandatory’s territory (Article 22) came close enough to annexation.
- 10 See the references to Italian and Japanese newspapers cited in BDFA 1989–1991: vol. X, 270, vol. XII, 7.

# 11 Society's war

## The evolution of a self-referential military system

*Gorm Harste*

Regarding European history it might well be correct to observe

that the greatest evils which oppress civilised nations are the result of war – not so much of actual wars in the past or present as of the unremitting, indeed ever-increasing preparation for war in the future. All the resources of the state, and all the fruits of its culture which might be used to enhance that culture even further, are devoted to this purpose.

(Kant 1991: 229–230; original in 1977 [1786]: 99)

The author of this phrase was Immanuel Kant, who wrote it in 1786, the year Frederick the Great died. The phrase might seem to be in contradiction to the view of Kant as an idealist or even a dreamer of peace, common to most scholars of international relations. How could peace be possible if the mobilization of resources absorbed all cultural efforts?

In his *Zum ewigen Frieden* (“Perpetual Peace”) from 1795, Kant proposes that peace endeavors form a moral obligation. However, his idea is not simply to advocate a transcendental peace imperative in naive contradiction to the realities of war. His problem is to enable a history of nature and civilization that gives room for a reasonable perspective on what Norbert Elias – following Kant – has called the process of civilization. In order to fulfill such a philosophy of history he constructs a theory of the evolution of warfare which contains the paradox that peace is possible because of the conditions of warfare. The central point is that, according to the nature of war, it has to be organized by such means that military armament paves the way to a legal form, a rule of law embedded in military states as *Rechtsstaaten*. In one sentence: “nature irresistibly wills that right should eventually gain the upper hand” (Kant 1991: 113; original in 1977 [1795]: 225).

Kant's theory of a military evolution, guaranteeing a rule of law, is concentrated to the point that it turns into an irony. He resumes his argument in this way:

Nature's provisional arrangement is as follows. Firstly, she has taken care that human beings are able to live in all the areas where they are settled. Secondly, she has driven them in all directions by means of war, so that

they inhabit even the most inhospitable regions. And thirdly, she has compelled them by the same means to enter into more or less legal relationships.

(Kant 1991: 109–110; original in 1977 [1795]: 219)

Thus, Kant's empirical suggestion is that territorial struggles are organized in ever more powerful ways, leading to states that are forms of "systems" which have emerged as "self-organizing entities" (Kant 1974 [1790]: §65, 322). This significant concept of "system" is used in manifold ways by Kant in *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (cf. Harste 1996).

My aim is to reconstruct a Kantian kind of argument. This will be done by means of a more recent systems theory as well as historico-sociological analysis. In order not to get lost in endless empirical studies, a historically oriented political theory is in desperate need of general sociological descriptions. The idea is to redescribe political theories in their context of military history by means of recent sociological systems theory. The discussions on war and peace take place in fora so different that the substance of the discussion is like the famous elephant touched by the five blind observers. With a few exceptions, international law, military history, historical research, international relations, the history of ideas and philosophy each seem to have ignored other perspectives (cf. Jannsen 1979, 1982; Knutsen 1997; Cornette 1993). What is required to observe and compare these perspectives is a conceptual framework and a theory at a sufficiently abstract level to cross-cut differences in terminology. At the same time, that theory shall be sensible enough to grasp semantic history. I propose Niklas Luhmann's sociological theory as a theory which meets these requirements.

My overall purpose is to elucidate what I have chosen to call "the Kantian moment," which I define as the turning point at which the complexity of modern state building has differentiated subsystems of military, organizational, financial and legal aspects to such a degree that the military "necessities of state" and "reason of state" open a way for a new organizational and legal form based on a separation of powers. From that moment the *self-description* of states is no longer attached to military survival but to a completely new form. To express the result of this process in general sociological terms: between the so-called military revolutions (in *pluralis*) and the political revolutions beginning at the end of the eighteenth century, a number of organizational revolutions can be identified. They involved a complex sub-differentiation (*Ausdifferenzierung*) between the systems of financial, legal, material, bureaucratic, political, scientific, educational and cultural supplies for the military system. Thereby, the military system turns into a distinctly separated subsystem that presupposes the functions of other subsystems.

At the core of the present chapter is a description of these differentiations according to a theory of evolution of subsystems. Today, there is one and perhaps only one theory capable of shouldering this substantial general conceptual burden – that of Niklas Luhmann. However, while Luhmann

himself wrote huge contributions in almost every corner of social analysis, his military analyses are scarcely more extensive than Kant's and mostly concern historical analyses of the semantics of state and state reason. Compared to classical open system theories in International Relations inspired by Talcott Parsons and Karl Deutsch, Luhmann's systems theory is far more occupied with the improbability of unities, with the emergence of systems, the meaning of communication, and with semantic transformations that give meaning to communication systems (cf. Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff 1971: 102–137). Furthermore its method is not causal analysis but interpretative functionalism. Functions occur as communication of meanings.

Luhmann's own empirical work is concerned with the evolution of semantics. In Bielefeld he was surrounded by colleagues such as Reinhart Koselleck who organized the voluminous *Deutsche Begriffsgeschichte* ("German history of concepts"). Luhmann wrote his own five volumes on historical semantics, *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik (Societal structure and semantics)*,<sup>1</sup> in which he analyzed the evolution of the structures of different semantics (Luhmann 1980, 1981b, 1989a, 1995b). In Niklas Luhmann's theory of the functional differentiation of modern subsystems of society, a central theme is provided by the *improbability* of the emergence of functional subsystems, whether legal, organizational, military, etc. Many operations take place. They might be observed according to the semantic codes which their operations follow. Such codes emerge and disappear. But only a few of them get stabilized through repetitions and especially through second-order codification, i.e. when some codes codify first-order codes. At that moment a subsystem emerges which is sub-differentiated from an environment of other subsystems.

My analysis falls into two parts. The first part analyzes how codes of war and peace emerged differentiated from other codes such as just/unjust. The second part discusses how codes were stabilized in a military system. One might choose to read the analysis as a verification of Luhmann's theory against the background of concrete historical material.

### **War/peace as a supercode of communication**

From the outset of what has been called the "natural order" in contractual theory, it is improbable that extremely decentralized societies dispersed in space might have formed military systems which have emerged in the course of Western history since antiquity. Codes of war and of warriors have emerged everywhere. Yet in most places military learning processes have not taken a shared, overall evolutionary form.

In Luhmannian theory it is decisive to identify emergent systems through their codifications, especially since they are described in self-descriptions of such systems, i.e. textual reflections about how observations operate. Such self-descriptions are present throughout military history, from Caesar's descriptions of his Gallic Wars to Clausewitz's *On War*, just to mention two of the most famous self-descriptions. Such descriptions depict semantically condensed



themes in terms of codes that, according to Luhmann, happen to have a binary form. Thus, when codes of war are in question, it is necessary to elaborate the meanings of key concepts.

As an introduction, some initial and *general* definitions useful to a systemic observation might be proposed here: *struggle* is defined as the *medium* through which *war* is defined as a *form* that operates through a *military system*; war is a unity of struggle as medium and a military system as form. Thus, there is a difference between struggle and military. Struggle might include a form of “street fighting.” Forms emerge through codifications of media. However, these differentiations and definitions do emerge as a result of evolutionary processes. Sub-differentiated operations in a system are separated from other operations taking place in the environment of a system. Even definitions of systems emerge as defined by the systems themselves: systems emerge as self-descriptive and self-defining systems. Thus, military systems redescribe struggle as “feud” and later as “skirmish” and “engagement” (Clausewitz’s *Gefecht*, Clausewitz 1952 [1932]: 320). War is, above all, what military systems describe as war; and therefore it demands careful conceptual elucidation to describe how – given this premise – war can be defined in terms of law also, i.e. as “just war,” or in terms of politics, as Clausewitz suggested.

Internal descriptions of such externalized environments are crucial to the evolution of a complex military system. Thus systems emerge when they are capable of indicating what they are and are not, thus operating *distinctions* between themselves and their environment. In the case of military systems, war emerged as a difference to peace. How did that codification between war and peace emerge?

In Luhmann’s earlier work, *selections* capable of stabilizing their own selections performed the same operation as did “distinctions” in his later theory. It is exactly these selections which are important to a theory of evolution since they characterize the form-dependency or, in neo-institutionalist terms, the “path-dependency” of system evolution: selections might be fatal to future selections. A recent example is the selection of the atomic bomb. An earlier example is the Hoplite formation in ancient Greece and its consequences for the Roman and Medieval phalange (cf. Corvisier 1999). All kinds of selections have been fatal in military history.<sup>2</sup> This could leave the impression of a random history, but the selections have to be selected themselves. Innovations observed as differences that made an impact were met with further innovations.

The demarcation drawn is important. In the operations of demarcations, the demarcations do not remain unaffected by the demarcation itself. Causal and stochastic analysis are incapable of handling such improbable results as military revolutions (cf. Black 1994: 10, 95). Causal explanations are logically unsatisfying to explain open-ended forms, since our description of causal processes is a kind of description that already views things from one side of the process – its end point.

The use of gunpowder and guns might serve as an example here: why should it be possible to control powder in any way, from one moment to another, and to put it into heavy cast iron tubes? Gunpowder does not control itself, but is handled and operated according to descriptions and learnings communicated

between able gunmen. It took well over a 100 years – until the fifteenth century – before guns and cannons were stabilized as a matter sufficiently codified to be unavoidable for any army in Europe. An infinite number of other innovations became visible and disappeared again during that time. Technological innovations are only innovations if they are described by a social system capable of selecting them and of selecting the selections with which they are coupled.

In analyzing the emergence of warfare and the military as systems, it is important to address the issue of war as symbolically generalized communication: Any kind of symbol observed by observers might demarcate a distinction calling for another demarcation. Demarcations do by necessity take place in time and space. They make distinctions between present and past and between the demarcated side and the other side. Many demarcations might be made and might emerge and disappear again when they are coupled only in loose ways to still further selections.

Luhmann's theory of the media of communication suggests that nothing in a medium points towards the actual forms which emerge through further social selections in social systems. The medium itself is open to selections which determine whether the medium should be coped with or not. Societies might not organize further selections in order to stabilize war. *However*, the problem is that only one side of a demarcation has to organize a struggle in order to communicate to competitors that either they have to obey or they have to copy strategies and programs (or to innovate new measures).

This has probably been the historical reason why innovations in warfare intensified in two historical periods: during late Greek antiquity and the first part of the Roman Empire, and since the twelfth century on the European continent, conflicts resulted in a competitive dynamic. They asked for innovations, selections and still more selections. War emerged as a *codified* form of communication. A certain kind of communication emerged as a communication codified according to the central code of *war/peace* (cf. Jannsen 1979, 1982). Peace was to be observed on the one side, as the internal side of a dichotomy and, as the preferred part – the side on which the gods and the good, justice and truth, were situated. Hence, the opposite side represented negations to descriptions of the preferred side.

From the outset and throughout history the binary opposition between war and peace seems to have been described in terms of generalized semantics available in pre-modern societies, i.e. according to oppositions between what is violence and what is the sacred. Sacred "situations" seem identifiable through means of opposition to violent intruders, symbols or others. And even the aim of *symbolizing* might become a signifying device in order to invent *diabolic* allusions that could enter the symbolic scene present in a situation (cf. Gerard 1972; Luhmann 1989a: 277, 2000c: 189). Thus, the present symbols could only be stabilized and thus represented through means of violence. If there are no threats, no struggles and no defense situations, an anticipation of their pure possibility could function as a symbolizing act. Sometimes the aim of symbolizing symbols, i.e. re-entering symbols into themselves, is sufficient. The

question, of course, is what happens with the sacral/diabolic code in the course of rising complexities in military system-building and within the context of transformed military semantics?

The Peloponnesian wars and their observation by the Macedonians were the scene of the battles for the first selections of a system of war sufficiently stabilized in order to be codified as a learning process (cf. J.-N. Corvisier 1999; Weber 1972: 681–686). Luhmann might be correct in claiming that the possibility of *writing* about the history and thus the learning processes of these wars might have been essential for their stabilization.<sup>3</sup> There were other major wars in other historical worlds, but they rarely stabilized through learning processes.

Furthermore, two other conditions have to be fulfilled. Struggle for space turns into symbolically generalized warfare much more easily if available space is small and populations are relatively large. This was certainly the case in Greece and a hundred years later in Italy as well as during the Hundred Years' War (so labelled by the early nineteenth-century national historians). On other occasions, withdrawal has been too easy, years and generations pass and lessons are forgotten. The other condition for the competitive struggle to be stabilized as a system of warfare is that the organized subsystems of the overall regional system (Europe, the Mediterranean, South-East Asia, the Aztec Empire) are somehow balanced, if not as objectively equal in terms of numbers and geographical size, then at least in terms of finance, tactics and strategies. This is what happened in post-Carolingian Europe. Warfare systems are not stabilized as systems until a competitive *military* system takes form. In this respect, historical sociology has paid too much attention to war and too little to military systems. What is central to this distinction between war and military? How does it emerge? What is observed by the distinction?

The distinction has been used together with another distinction, namely the one between war and battle. Many battles are fought not on the battlefield but on the supply side, in competitions to supply not the battle nor the war but the military in war. Thus still another distinction emerges – the one between supply and attack as well as the one between supply and defense – two different distinctions according to Clausewitz, who was much more occupied with the distinction defense/attack (cf. Clausewitz 1952 [1932]: 511ff, 767ff). Primarily, military codes become used whenever society is organized into subsystems structurally coupled to a system of warfare. This conceptual frame is central to the elaborations below.

### **The distinction war/peace before the Crusades**

The distinction between war and peace seems to have encountered a number of decisive transformations around the eleventh century. From that moment, war seems to have been subject to a *realist* development of organized military systems while peace has been an *idealized* term useful in political and legal systems. Before I discuss the historical establishment of the asymmetry in the distinction war/peace, it is important to be aware that this establishment has been strongly reinforced again since the first Gulf War and particularly since 11 September

2001 (cf. Tibi 2001a, 2001b). Notions of holy war, Jihad and Crusades appear again, referring to the classical legal codes of *Jus ad Bellum* and *Jus in Bellum*.

In an article "What We're Fighting For," signed by sixty leading American intellectuals, the central chapter on "A Just War?" starts with the following words:

We recognise that all war is terrible, representative finally of human political failure. We also know that the line separating good and evil does not run between one society or another, much less between one religion and another; ultimately, that line runs through the middle of every human heart. Finally, those of us – Jews, Christians, Muslims, and others – who are people of faith recognise our responsibility, stated in our holy scriptures, to love mercy and to do all in our power to prevent war and live in peace.

(Blankenborn 2002)

The questions seem to be theological or rather trans-theological ones: What are the relations between theology, law, war and politics? And what crosscuts these religions that all presuppose one God, one world and one textual whole – *based on writing*? Since the dissolution of the Roman order that reigned the single Mediterranean world for centuries the question persisted of how the unity of the world could be re-established. Seemingly some of the central codes about such an order have stayed almost unchanged as to how peace and justice imply meanings of almost "eternal" stability.

While the natural or religious order of peace has been submitted to an extremely stable semantic order, war has been submitted to one revolution after another and has been among the most dynamic evolutionary subsystems. On the threshold of the second millennium, ideas of preserving an overall "peace" (*pax*) among the descendants of Charlemagne had disappeared as a practical reality. *Pax, Frid*, was only possible in small areas, among closely bound members of a regent family (cf. Janssen 1979, 1982; Mitteis 1975 [1940]). The relation between legal and religious regulations concerning peace was loosely coupled. The interpretation of the relation was not monopolized in a stabilized power system. At the same time, however, *pax* was important to the Augustinian doctrine of God's empire: *pax* was thought of as eternal and transcendent, as another order beyond the temporal earthly undertakings of man.

There are many interpretations of the formation of law, of the signification of the Crusades, their meaning, and about the takeoff in feudal order which took place with the formation of Europe after the rupture between the Eastern Roman Church and the Catholic Church in 1054 (cf. Flori 2001). The Crusades were probably the consequence of long intensive efforts to organize a stronger hold for the church, endeavors in which Cardinal Hildebrand, the later Pope Gregor VII, surely played a very active part, but which nonetheless were significant for several movements since the tenth century (cf. Berman 1983).

One of these efforts was the *reconquista* – re-conquering – of the Iberian Peninsula, helped by a strongly intensified symbolization of warriors as saints. Such saints could be symbolized with statues and in that form represent some

kind of eternity which stayed present in combats that were – to an even higher degree than before – described as heroic and honorable. Another concerned the monasteries' struggle to preserve their domains, their agricultural production, if not their buildings and the persons living in and next to them. *Pax dei, pax ecclesiae, Gottesfrieden*, God's peace on earth emerged as the "truce of God." In a number of succeeding assemblies, councils and synods in Le Puy (980), Charroux (989) and Narbonne (990), and later in Limoges, Poitiers, Verdun, Hery, Aise, etc., the idea of a *pactum pacis* was spread. A great number of codes emerged. Their complexity was surely in need of selective reduction, but the selections proceeded at a slow pace. "Warre" or "guerre" was nothing more than *just combat* for a cause and it did not mean large scale mobilization. The word "war" simply meant "worse," i.e. less than good. Slowly, more distinct selections and codes emerged.

Knights were no longer to be regarded as synonyms for plundering and menaces to peace, but were honored as fighters for peace. This "honorification" gave access to privileges and established new positions. The declarations of peace are amazing to read: singular knights took the oath that they would no longer steal from the church, nor pillage travellers who were inside a church, nor – later – those who escorted monks and priests. Not only *space*, but *time* too, was involved. Plundering and killings should not take place at Easter or on Sundays, and later from Saturday until Monday, after, in 1054, the council of Narbonne secured eighty days of peace. A *social* dimension was also added: of course, clerics were not to be attacked, but neither were noble women! Yet later, social duties to protect those attacked were added. "The Peace of God" was not a universal code, but rather concrete, incremental, negotiated, fragile and local (cf. Flori 2001: 70). The "outlaw" was a "friedlos," "fredløs," a "peace-loose." In England the judge was later to be called a Judge of Peace (cf. Fenger 1993: 169ff). Increasingly, the "warrior," "le guerrier," was generalized as a notion that was transformed from an opposition to the peacemaker to a defender of the peace.

Wars against the Moor, the Saracens, and the Viking intruders, as well as earlier conflicts with the Magyars to the East, followed by the Mongols in the thirteenth century, were established as symbolically honorable deeds which were undertaken parallel to the saints that fought for churchly peace. Thus, *pax dei* served as a code for reducing the complexities in a number of spatial, material, temporal and social dimensions. It was a code that facilitated the coordination of social communication about problems, thus serving organized communication (cf. Knutsen 1997: 28).<sup>4</sup> *Securitas, lex* and *pax* were interwoven, and insecurity and injustice were to be observed and codified from the perspective of security and peace, from concrete places, churches, towns and networks of monasteries. The peace was to secure peace, justice was to secure a form of just justice – rather than an unjust justice.

From that moment on, guarantees were described as a yet more hierarchical *self-codification*. Local justice and peace could manage and authorize themselves in universal terms. At the same time, as this still *loosely* codified system of peace was

established, law was reinterpreted as a coherent body of rights and interpretations of rights: Aggregations of Roman tribunal trials and court law were re-described according to theological representations of a *body* of what was understood as a Bible-based coherent whole – whether it made good or little sense (cf. Berman 1983).<sup>5</sup>

Other Christian notions such as *caritas*, *gratia* and *bonum commune* were related to the establishment of peace. Security, peace and justice were interconnected with welfare, care, order and the common good. In terms of communication theory these marks and notions were established as codes on how to communicate and on how communication could uphold itself from the perspective of its own codes. Peace was a message, codified as a cosmological belief inside a corporate spirit. Particular signification and meaning together with cosmological sacral ideas of a *spirit* transcending time and space, a Holy Spirit, established interpretations that coordinated social systems. It was a spirit that became important as a sub-differentiated form of communication across space and time (not unlike the worldwide web of today). But its medium, interpretation, was not information, it was closely bound to the way its symbols received their substantial meaning: collegial meetings in oral co-presence, as in the Lord's Supper (cf. Quillet 1972; Luhmann 2000c: 328–353).

The *communio pacis* was fundamental to societal and geographical forms of empowered peace. “The peace of the king” and the *Landesfrieden* were established as a peace in which a Christian could not kill another Christian. But who were to be members of the community, those to be included in the *Corpus Spiritus*, and who was to exclude (cf. Kantorowicz 1957)? Thus the interpretation of the words and the order and hierarchy of the words, their meaning and substance was primordial. Significant was the *presence* and the *place* of the presence that should be represented in other places.

## The Crusades

Gregor VII's first call in 1074 to support the Byzantine Empire against the Turkish invasions needs surely to be understood together with his empowerment of the nascent papal competences which followed the papal dictate from 1075. The defenders of a symbolic order could attack the Antichrist, thus letting diabolic warriors *re-enter*<sup>6</sup> the symbolic part of the distinction *symbol/diabol*. From that moment, the pope claimed to be able to authorize offensive fighting against the war, i.e. whether Viking, Moor, Saracen or Turkish infidels were to be fought in the name of God's peace. Those who could not communicate on these premises should be excommunicated. And those who could communicate in order to reinforce the communication would deserve privileges.

Now, it is important to notice that the entitlements of the pope originated in the claim to speak for the grave of Saint Peter. The point was that holy communication through signs and symbols was substantiated as “re-presence” and “reincarnation” of meaning. Furthermore, all communication could be understood according to the distinction symbolic/diabolic, i.e. holy or unholy: Because

symbols contained substance they also contained the diabolic sinful side of life; they were symbols for the world and they were the world itself. *But* holy places were purified places. Purified places, persons and words had a hierarchical meaning that could give order to other meanings from within. Thus, a pope who could speak in the name of the defender of the holy grave, Jerusalem, could authorize his communication and ex-communications even more (cf. Flori 2001; Luhmann 2000c: 187–197). Accordingly, warriors of the Crusades were offered a privileged position with a pre-given form of rights and justice – a position inherited by their descendants through the ennobilizing code of a “*noblesse d’épée*.”

The Christian, the Jewish and the Islamic interpretations of war and peace all use the Pentateuch. In particular, Deuteronomy (the fifth book of Moses) describes how God gave the Jews the right to conquer the lands of Canaan, etc.<sup>7</sup> After more than a thousand years, Mohammed offered another interpretation. But it is no wonder that the eleventh century distinction between peace and war, codified in terms of law and organization, did not appear in that form in the Koran. *Jihad* is equal neither to *holy war* nor to *just war*. Although the Shiite tradition is close to such a reunited religious, military, political and legal interpretation, the far more widespread Sunni tradition is not. *Qital* is physical struggle, while *Jihad* is the endeavor to bring the “house of peace” (*Dar al-salam*) to the “house of Islam” (*Dar-al-Islam*). Only infidels conduct wars as unjust aggression (cf. Tibi 1998; 2001b: 191–232). Of course, *Qital* is possible as defense; while *Jihad* is rather a claim on the right of diffusion and propagation and a resistance against attack on the basis of that right. As in Christianity, “peace” is described on the symbolic side asymmetrically to a diabolic side, though, on the other hand, as a purely eternalized transcendental notion, hence leaving reality only to truces and armistices.<sup>8</sup> Another thing is, of course, the anti-modern and anti-globalization fundamentalist movements of Hassan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb and post-Gulf War Shiite movements (cf. Tibi 2001b: 133–142).

The Crusades completely transformed the Arab notion of just defense from a loose notion of *Jihad* to a justified war, well organized by the line of leaders Zingi, Nouredin and Saladin.

Decisions present in certain places at certain moments were to have a meaning that – without inherent diabolics – could claim to represent the holy whole. Thus debates on universalism or nominalism have ever since been innate to a number of struggles. First were the struggles about land, especially regions, cities and particular infrastructural bottlenecks. They gained signification far beyond what could simply be replaced by another place or area functionally equivalent to the spot in question. Second were the struggles about the degree of coherence or centralization/decentralization of signification. In the one form, communicative order could stay coherent and centralized if words and terms were hierarchical in weight, substance and immanent implied sense. In the other form, words and terms were only arbitrary symbols, loosely distributed and exchangeable as commodities on a market, even if they were treaties about peace and truce.

This struggle over the form of communication and the sense of codes is decisive for the organizational system of society.<sup>9</sup> Thus, again and again diplomatic negotiations and decision-making have taken the form of disputes about the trans-substantiation of the sacraments, especially their number and in particular the meaning of the words about the body and blood of Christ. To declare these discussions as symbolic only was to take side with the nominalist party in the dispute. Hence the universalists controlled the debate for more than 500 years. Still the Council of Trento and the French Estates disputed these matters in the middle of the sixteenth century (cf. Jouanna 1996: 306ff, 1989: 282ff; Kantorowicz 1957: 87ff; Pallesen 2001; Quillet 1972: 112–118).

Nevertheless, at the turn of the eleventh century the point was that war, religion and law began to operate structurally coupled, as well as structurally coupled to the political associations around the emperor, the kings, dukes and counts. The most well-known form of this emerging structural coupling was the distinction between sacred and the profane authorities as represented by the pope and the emperor and legitimized through the doctrine of “the two swords.” It originated in the fifth century (Gelasius), was reinforced with the Charlemagne crowning ceremony in 800 in Rome, and ended in a compromise with the papal right to the investiture of bishops and conversely, the pope through the cardinals. The point is that traditional Jewish semantics of God’s authorization of war against infidels was transformed into a legal code subject to papal interpretation. Thus war was justified by the nature of theology; the medium for this justification was legal interpretation.

From that moment the *jus in bello* and *jus ad bellum* were established with the pope as central negotiator in European wars. This endured until well into the Hundred Years’ War, in which the role of the king, on the French as well as on the English side, emerged as yet more important, whereas the decentralized knights could not manage their own defense.<sup>10</sup> The pope could neither hinder an association of dukes around a king, nor Languedoc from associating with the northern French Capetian dynasty. The French dominance over the church paved the way for the Avignon era of the pope (cf. Autrand 1998).

### **Emerging forms of military autopoiesis: the justice of supply techniques**

It is open to discussion *how* and *when* loosely codified military systems and the war code evolved into a self-referential, self-organizing and autopoietic system.<sup>11</sup> The question relates to an increasing autonomy from, and the decreasing dependence on, externally defined conditions. In the place of just war, politics became symbolized by the use of a new rhetoric, while military supply became contingent upon extreme complexities that demanded judiciary controls by war commissars. The desertion among soldiers, the failure to pay troops and lower officers, and an according extreme lack of control over military campaigns, strategies and tactics, all forced central administrators to develop a complex system of control and revision of supply, expenditures, taxation, concrete operations in constructions of



*routes et étapes*, infrastructural lines and depots. The possibility of conducting war campaigns increasingly depended on the possibility of handling military logistics (cf. Biloghi 1998; Kröner 1980; Smedley-Weill 1995; Cornette 1993).

One peculiar factor which revealed itself during the course of studies of historical military statistics is that the figures should not be trusted. Soldiers deserted in mass numbers; theoretical numbers about, for example, registered soldiers were often reduced to 50 per cent after a few months or even days. Soldiers and mercenaries did not carry passports, and were extremely difficult to trace if they disappeared. That is why the galleys were used so often, and in an even more extensive and intensive way in France. It was primarily a means to control deserted soldiers. However, the problem was even greater. The control of armies was striking in its absence.

Thus, French political entrepreneurs like Sully and Richelieu learned that resource mobilization had to be controlled:

To prepare an army, marine or land-based, is first of all to dispose of money, i.e. a network of collection and centralization of money to transform it into an instrument of power, based on a whole industry which it has been necessary to create, thus, to organize space with its places and lines of function and its means of heavy transport for long distances.

(Meyer 1998: 175)

During the sixteenth century, commissars were used to execute special tasks throughout France. They were especially occupied with the organization of supplies to armies passing through France. Armies of 30,000 soldiers could destroy whole regions if their supplies were not properly organized, and it would be an extraordinary benefit to the French army if it could use its position in the middle, in between all the Habsburg armies, and let its own armies traverse the country. Routes and stables were organized, cities made responsible with committees and registers about where and in what numbers the soldiers were to sleep, what they could claim to eat, what equipment they could dispose of, etc. Abuse was regulated and severely punished. This was organized by commissars working as *civilians*, but in cooperation with the general lieutenant in each “*généralité*” of France. Later this commissioned office was no longer given only to military officers – at least not in old and central parts of France – but also to the so-called *intendants* recruited from the masters of requests – advisers to the kings councils – themselves recruited from the judicial parliaments.

The point is that judicial functions and judicial codes were introduced in order to control the army. From that moment, the size and weight of the military system could no longer simply be calculated in terms of soldiers and officers. New kinds of staffs became relevant, staffs with thousands of employees. Military supplies and equipment, from cannons to uniforms and food rations for men and horses, were coded and communicated throughout France, routes and depots were established, communication lines were drawn, mapped and codified in stages, and needs were codified and communicated to

all officers in charge and to the soldiers themselves. Regular salaries were introduced, rights and abuses codified. In 1544, the first ordinance regulated the system; in 1549, the next one followed; and in 1567, fifty permanent commissars and fifty controllers as well as a corresponding hierarchy were introduced. After this transition, whenever “states organized war” they also had to organize a great number of other details and sub-differentiated undertakings. Later Frederick the Great made logistics the first lecture for his generals: “Some general says that to create an army it is necessary to begin with the stomach” (Frédéric 1788: T. 6, 134).

### **The secularization of war?**

The tradition of *justum bellum* probably attained strength through the possibility of a strong codification of the positive side of the binary opposition war/peace. Canonical law gained a strong position because it was central to the most organized extended communication system in Europe for centuries. Between 200 and 400 officers worked in Avignon, far more than in any central administration before the sixteenth century. Thus there were no competitors equal to the papal setting of terms of peace and war.

This, however, changed. One aspect was the problem of sustaining a complex monopoly of good and perfect semantics. This probably ceased with the printing press revolution (cf. Eisenstein 1983; Luhmann 1997a: 249–315; Brunkhorst 2000: 158–178). Another factor was the internal dynamics of war efforts once they began to become organized. The organization of cannons was, literally, what shot the hole in the walls of papal power in 1494. Would that lead to what we today understand as a “secularization” of war?<sup>12</sup>

The beginning of what I will call the takeoff in military system evolution was due to the organization of territorial domains in Northern Italy, in Milan and Florence as well as in a Venice challenged by Ottoman naval efforts at the end of the fourteenth century (cf. Covini 1998). This organizational increase was then coupled to military stabilization under the French dynastic effort to gain a momentum of specialization during the last part of the Hundred Years' War. Norbert Elias explains the monopolization process and the Hundred Years' War as a complex *Verflechtung* (“interweaving”) of monopolies of taxation, diplomatic organization, judicial power and army governance. Later the *closure* of the self-referential process into a self-organizing system was due to the long seventeenth century that invented a secularized state system due to a resacralized description of states as organizational systems. Decisions were legitimized as decisions in a state in order to preserve a state – according to codes used by other states. In such a way, states were constructed according to codes that communicated across states. Paradoxically, the self in the sovereign self-descriptive statement of the state as “*l'état, c'est moi*” was a uniform and common kind of self-reference in all European states (cf. Dyson 1980; Luhmann 1989a; 1995b).

## The resacralization of war

Since the transition that revolutionized codes of law, war and organization around 1100, three things have happened:

- 1 Law has gained a legal form, i.e. the code of law re-entered law and a legal system emerged in the sense that the system's description of its environment was described in codes, the justice of which in its turn could be described (cf. Luhmann 1993a: 270–285).
- 2 War was codified as a campaign against campaigns, i.e. a combat that was declared to be superior in authority compared to the combat conducted by enemy forces.
- 3 Organization was codified in terms of authoritative delegation across time and space in a commitment surpassing other kinds of loyalty (cf. Harste 2001, 2003).

The *indeterminacy* of these codes is crucial to the understanding of the more-than-hundred years of intense war campaigns from the late sixteenth century to the early eighteenth century. At the end of the sixteenth century, observers such as Jean Bodin, de la Noue and de Lucinge were becoming aware that the relations between theology, law, state administration and the military organization of war were changing. Old models and ideas of honour and noblesse were being transformed. Power was reasoned in new ways, by new means of communication and through new codes. The question here is how military transformations altered the questions posed to the codes of war and peace. The problem was to find some kind of form by which the structural coupling between the codes could be achieved.

The “monopoly” of such a form was the issue in question and it is not difficult to understand why; because there was only one God, one world, one final form – so it seemed from the theological point of view, a view that penetrated political research as evident, for example, in the analyses of Jean Bodin; and it was legitimized ceremonially at all forms of council meetings (cf. Hanley 1999; Bonney 1989: 48–63; Jouanna 1989: 281ff). It even seems obligatory to make a just call to arms, according to the doctrine of “just resistance” to tyrannical rulers. Hence, beyond those struggles no established point of view was possible. The complexity of ruling jurisdictions in the High Middle Age had only been possible because fundamental divine codes of conflict settlement were presupposed.

There was a tremendous search for a new re-established form, to unify all codes, in geometry, nature, comparative politics or theology. But, of course, if nothing could be found, the newly established authority would be the one that could coerce other positions to accept the point of view of coercion, i.e. of the war campaigns. Thus, this “realistic” struggle was indeed a struggle about the form of war campaigns; *the campaign that could mobilize and coordinate the most complex number of codes and already more or less loosely established social subsystems would be the*

*campaign that could get the upper hand in the conflict.* No wonder, then, that the final religious war, the Thirty Years' War, happened to be so extremely violent. As Joël Cornette describes it, it was a "system of violence" (cf. Cornette 1993; Parker 1996: 45ff).<sup>13</sup> In fact, war lasted only thirty years in the German Empire, but about eighty years in the United Provinces' war of liberation against Spain and, after some inner civil wars, with especially the Huguenots in La Rochelle, only thirteen years in France, although it was sustained until the Peace of the Pyrenees with Spain in 1659.

The most important part of Luhmann's theory of the state concerns not the state monopolization of military force, but the monopolization of that emerging X that saw itself entitled to organize war, law, taxes and commercial regulations and, above all, entitled to describe itself as an "estate" central to the public body, i.e. the "state" (*l'état*) (cf. Luhmann 1987a: 74–103, 1989a: 65–148, 1990e, 1995b: 101–137, 2000a: chapter 4; Harste 2003).<sup>14</sup>

Joël Cornette has provided a brilliant examination of the French adherence to the Protestant camp, its background and its consequences. During a period of fifty years in which France suffered from religious wars, campaigns were fought on where central power should be established. In 1629 the Catholic Christian King Louis XIII (1610–1643) had besieged the *Huguenot* stronghold La Rochelle in a way spectacular to anybody invited to observe the siege. There should be no other "state in the state" than the king's. Nevertheless, France officially declared "la guerre publique et solennelle" against *Catholic* Spain, in Brussels, on 19 May 1635, (officially) in order to liberate the archbishop of Trier from Spanish captivity (cf. Cornette 1993: 128ff).

We can only understand how drastic the transformation of French positions was when we take into consideration the Imperial Habsburg's threat against Northern European Protestant positions in the Palatinate, Brandenburg, Denmark, Sweden and, above all, the Netherlands. Habsburg domination of those countries would lead to a circumscription of French territory. This "danger" was, before Richelieu, clearly described by an unknown author in a book called *Discours des Princes et Etats de la Chrétienté* from 1624.<sup>15</sup> The military necessities led Richelieu to realize that France had to counterbalance Habsburg domination. But wars and royal positions were legitimized by God and by huge ceremonies that demonstrated the sacral positions of kings as immediate to the reign of God. The transition from an anti-Huguenot campaign to an alliance with Protestant powers seemed impossible if symbolic politics were not completely to be transformed. The theatricalization of the war declaration as a "just war" was unsurpassable.

In his enormous book of 1625, *De la guerre et de la paix*, Hugo Grotius had demonstrated the potentialities of a strict Christian semantics about just war – including semantics from the Old Testament, but not the Koran. After a few years in the margins of diplomacy, Grotius was later to become the French representative to the Swedish king. But before that, Richelieu invented an in-depth reconstruction of the sacral symbolization and thematization of monarchical power. Bodin's theory of an absolute monarchy was reinvented by

the intendant Cardin le Bret in *De la souveraineté de roi* (1632); hundreds of books and pamphlets were published, and ceremonies were established to a degree that transcended all known forms of propaganda (cf. Thuau 2000; Bonney 1989). The king was a reincarnated “king of crusades” and was described as “God’s warrior” and “the emperor in his kingdom.” Even the most important ally, the Swedish king Gustav Adolph, was subject to such descriptions (cf. Roberts 1992, 1995). The reason of God and the *raison of state* were in alliance – beyond whatever could be said from imperial and/or papal traditions. Thus, even classic architecture was re-invented in a French eternal form, which later was to be surpassed once more by the state of the Sun King.

During that transformation, semantics of state, war and military *necessity* were reconstructed at a level at which the material necessities could be described on a new re-sacralized level. The criticism of counter-reformists against the theological semantics involved in Richelieu’s project was met by a renewed theology but also by a third and more secular rationalist movement in which reason of state, military reason and theological reason were only aspects of a more abstract semantics about reasoning. From that moment, military problems could be subject to discussion in their own terms. War campaigns described in secular terms appeared. Thus the result of the religious struggles was that the military, the state and the justice of both were subject to an abstraction process. *War gained a new signification, war could – so it seemed – determine what was war and what was to be peace. The war semantics thus happened to be crucial in the construction of the new state semantic. War emerged as war about the codes of war.* Was war conducted in order to reshape religion, or politics, doctrines of science, art or commercial relations? Contrary to the reductive thoughts of Carl Schmitt, the sovereign is not so much the master of war as the master of peace and because of this he can be master of justice – as supreme and sovereign judge – and the one who organizes preparations for war (cf. Harste 2001). War emerged as an activity conducted in order to select the form-dependencies of future wars, i.e. to decide about decisions by means of a form that referred to itself.

However, the complexities of war campaigns are embedded in forms and programs, themselves subject to military competition. War was not only battles. Rather, battles were additives to the complexities being fought out. This is simply because struggles were about the entire form of war campaigns. They were struggles about the form of society, of political semantic, of social and divine order, of the substance of justice as well as about the separation between land and sea and between city and rural power, about infrastructure, routes and staples, channels and garrisons, use of wood from forests, harbors, form and size of taxes and of rising elites to organize taxes, about the need of scientific innovations and about the need of tolerance (cf. Kröner 1980; Biloghi 1998).

Power gained the form of military power. Accordingly, military power emerged as a power that could sustain itself, especially in military confrontation between complex sub-differentiated organizational systems that happened to call themselves states. It was difficult to sustain and support the extreme burdens of military systems if battles were not fought sometimes, thus – not without important biblical references – the focus on an (eventually) single and “decisive battle” emerged.

My point is that we speak about an evolutionary system in which, first, innovations are not only innovations for one dynastic power or one state but – because the system is evolutionary and because “coercion works” – innovations to be imitated or copied by other powers as well. Second, the military innovations operate and are codified in a self-referential structure of a system, but the specialized self-reference of that system involves increasing complexities in subsystems structurally remote from military subsystems themselves. Political support, financial resources, equipment, education, and agriculturally, industrially and even aesthetically specialized codes presuppose other kinds of self-referential systems.

To summarize, it seems that state-building is the history of the emergence of a number of even more operationally closed systems that obtained monopolies in the organization of taxes and the military (cf. Porter 1994: 58). In the course of time, these monopolies became fixed in territories with central domains. More functions followed, such as central courts and capitals and, later, circumscribed peripheries. With yet more means they fixed populations that emerged as registered taxpayers and peasant soldiers (citizens came much later).

Whether acceptable or not in political or legal terms, war justified (a) what happened to be war and not to be war and thus peace; (b) when there was war and when there was peace; (c) against whom and with whom war was conducted and peace was claimed; and (d) how war was conducted and how peace was established. Thus the code of war emerged as a code of codes. The self-descriptions of military systems could describe how war was observed and how war campaigns observed themselves as a second-order system.

### **Conclusion: sovereign self-descriptions**

Observed from the point of view of systems theory, the military revolution took place as an establishment of a system to describe not only an environment that could be observed by all other systems, but a system that could monopolize its own *self-descriptions* and organize its own codes. From that moment peace negotiations and peace treaties described borders and territories (cf. Luhmann 1982a; Kratochwil 1986; Israel 1967). From the seventeenth century the military system observed itself by means of a specialized form of self-descriptions, not only in monuments of war propaganda but as texts for internal use. Until that transition, descriptions of military campaigns, of “the art of war” (Sun Tzu Machiavelli), did not re-enter the military organization in any differentiated form. Through military academies, however, former experiences and the reflection of war in the form of written experiences took place as a reflection of whatever unity could be observed in military campaigns – if any. Often such self-descriptions describe what seems unforeseen and unnecessary to describe.

From François de la Noue's *Discours politiques et militaires* from 1587 to the many military descriptions of Frederick the Great (cf. Frédéric 1788), a more departmentalized military organization was able to use such descriptions. Frederick wrote to his generals who later sub-differentiated with officers specialized in staffs,

i.e. units that should observe the decisions and commands of the army. War campaigns were still to be described as “art,” simply because of their unrepeated contingencies, and situations were observed as always new. Nevertheless Frederick described this as a form that was an object of planning, hence the invention of planning staffs such as Napoleon’s cabinet. The self-descriptions were the part of a military whole that was specialized in describing the whole as a rationally planned system. Frederick the Great semantically transformed the relation between the state and its leader. The leader was only “in service of the state” and a “co-citizen” of the state as anybody else, and Frederick even observed this as a duty that constitutes the positions of all servants and officers of the state. Moral obligation and legal forms of organization entered the military state.

As Frederick the Great was the first to notice, for instance in his *Testament politique* from 1752, military systems were increasingly complex to a level that surpassed the capacities of generals (cf. Friedrich 1987 [1752]: 134). The well-ordered *Wohlfahrtsstaat* (“welfare state”) departmentalized the military system into a sub-differentiated system among other sub-differentiated subsystems. The code of war became a complementary code to the codes of politics, peace, justice, science, finance, food production, etc. Depots for armies as well as the civil population, military academies and the industrial complexity of military production of equipment meant that not only did the number of men in arms have to rise, but that there also had to be an increase in the proportion of logistics out of control of the military system as a system of war campaigns.

The military effort was no longer only to be counted in numbers of soldiers. The numbers of teachers, researchers and industrialists of all sorts could be included or rather structurally coupled to a military system that began to be observed, described and codified by other self-referential and self-organizing subsystems of society. This is what I have called “the Kantian moment,” i.e. the moment when the military form of society was coupled structurally to legal and political forms in a separation of powers. Codes of peace re-entered into codes of war through the complexities of military systems. From Abbé Saint-Pierre’s *Projet d’une paix permanente* of 1713 to Kant’s *Zum ewigen Frieden* of 1795, the “systems of peace” had to be part of the “systems of war.” What one party in war disposes of, whether arms, symbols or justifications, the other has to copy, whether they belong to similar cultures, consenting powers or to conflicting opposed powers – and probably *especially* if they are opposed. That is why it is suggestive to observe international relations with a strong theory of social communication such as Luhmann’s, i.e. a theory which does not presuppose an ontology of societies involved but observes the resulting constructed reality of the interrelations involved.

Since the establishment of the Westphalian semantics we have been used to describing organizational systems that have described themselves as states and as “sovereign,” i.e. as if they were self-determined unities. It might be fruitful to question what is meant by the word and the world of “self-determination.” Those words are not normatively neutral, neither do they necessarily, in a cogni-

tive dimension, provide a good fit to the world that has emerged with the Westphalian system.

Thus we might say that the sovereign systems in Europe were not the post-monarchical states of Europe, but the self-referential, self-organizing and autopoietic subsystems of military, finance, research, law, infrastructure, etc., *in between* the European organizational subsystems that communicated more or less identical codes across the boundaries.

The military system emerged as a "sovereign," self-referential system. So did the economic system, the legal system, the system of research, etc. The borders between the territorial states seem to have operated as guarantees that the two sides of a border establish equal military, organizational, financial and infrastructural codes, forms and programs. Observed by systems theory, borders were only borders according to some specific organizational codes of taxation, and later conscription too, but not borders between social systems.

## Notes

- 1 A fifth volume *Liebe als Passion* (Luhmann 1982a) was published separately.
- 2 Cf. the classical analysis of fatal decisions in Allison (1971: 16ff). Here decisions are revealed as decisions about decisions in complex organizations, cf. Luhmann (2000b).
- 3 Luhmann's elaboration of this point especially concerns the significance of the printing press for learning processes in the sixteenth century and later, which certainly is correct from the military point of view.
- 4 The general theory about modalities of temporal, material and social reductions of complexity being decisive for meaningful communication in social systems is elaborated in Luhmann 1984a: 112ff: It is impossible to communicate socially about every matter at the same time: complexities have to be reduced, i.e. selections are necessary in communication.
- 5 Berman's comprehensive study of the papal revolution in the legal system around 1100 is thoroughly conceivable in terms of Luhmann's systems theory, in general – as well as in terms of evolution theory and semantic differentiations between law and religion. The same is the case of Spruyt (1994).
- 6 *Re-entering* is a central concept in Luhmann's systems theory; the concept signifies the description of the opposite party in a distinction by the first party; social systems thus establish descriptions of their environment inside the systems themselves.
- 7 Please note that in his extensive interpretation of Deuteronomy, Hugo Grotius did not discuss the Islamic tradition at all. However, Grotius distinguished clearly between "legal interpretations" of the Evangelic and the Pentateuch traditions (cf. Grotius 1999 [1625]: 59/60).
- 8 According to E. Tyan (1965: 539): "Only truces, whose duration ought not, in principle to exceed ten years, are authorized. But even such truces are precarious, inasmuch as they can, before they expire, be repudiated unilaterally should it appear more profitable for Islam to rescue the conflict." Cf. *Koran*, Sura 2, 4 and 5.
- 9 This is obvious in the *Koran* as well, cf. Sura 5: 99, 30: 20/21, 27/28. The relation between communication and community is especially obvious in Sura 2: 209/213.
- 10 In *The Civilizing Process*, Norbert Elias (1994) has demonstrated a number of systemic mechanisms in the centripetal and centrifugal processes of the Hundred Years' War which can easily be reconstructed in terms of Luhmann's more advanced systemic theory.
- 11 Luhmann does not distinguish between evolutionary levels of these concepts.



- 12 Reinhart Koselleck notes that the “secularization” was brought into the peace negotiations in Münster by French diplomats and referred critically to the transition of clerical possessions to protestant princes (cf. Koselleck 2000: 180).
- 13 The extreme violence was surely above all due to large numbers of plundering troops who were not sufficiently supplied, or who, sometimes, had been recently relieved. This happened at a moment when only very few fortifications were established, especially in the relatively disarmed German Empire.
- 14 Another interpretation of the “étatization” of this X is given in Bourdieu 1994.
- 15 Later, the book was classified as Père Joseph’s (cf. Thuau 2000: 180ff).

# 12 Organizations in/and world society

A theoretical prolegomenon

*Mathias Albert and Lena Hilkermeier*

## **The concept of “organization” and its neglect in international relations/world society studies**

A substantial amount of politics beyond the nation state takes place in and through international organizations. International organizations have become an important structural feature of global politics. Indeed, the *process* of international organization, understood as the proliferation of international organizations particularly after the Second World War and the increased competencies invested in these organizations, together with the process of international regime-formation has been conceptualized by a neo-liberal/neo-institutionalist research agenda in such a way as to suggest a possible moderation of the effects of, if not a qualitative change in the anarchic structure of, an international system of sovereign states.<sup>1</sup> Yet, for all the diversity in studies on international organizations, it seems fair to say that the conceptualization of the process and phenomenon of international organization(s) remains wedded to an essentially state-centric view of international relations. This stands in marked contrast to the discussions which have emerged on the emerging contours of a “post-Westphalian” system which call for a reconsideration of notions of statehood and sovereignty central to state-centric approaches in IR. While the ongoing reconceptualization of international organizations’ constitutive units, i.e. states, arguably also requires us to reconceptualize international organizations themselves, the diversity regarding the shape of a “post-Westphalian” order highlights the necessity to embed such a reconceptualization in a broader theoretical framework. After all, it is the very notion of an “international system” which becomes theoretically questionable if international relations are detached from state-centric ontologies. However, it seems fair to say that within most theoretical frameworks which compete to offer comprehensive conceptualizations of “post-Westphalian” international relations, be they in the form of an international or global society or a world system, international organizations have received strikingly little attention.

Of course, this latter observation is probably due to the fact that the concept of international organization itself is firmly tied to a state-centric view. This is also reflected in the fact that, despite international organizations and the process

of international organization featuring prominently in the IR literature, the research has focused mainly on the external effects of international organizations and the way they change the agendas and structures of international politics. Despite a rich literature on the emergence of international organizations and sophisticated classificatory schemes,<sup>2</sup> strikingly little attention has been paid to the concept of “organization” itself. Particularly noteworthy in this respect is the continued neglect which students of international organizations exhibit towards the vast body of a conceptually rich literature in organization theory.<sup>3</sup> Reception of this literature by and large remains limited to traditional Weberian accounts of organizations as bureaucratic apparatuses, with an interest in seeking to explain why and how international organizations are able to generate policies and conduct politics on their own, irrespective of – and sometimes contrary to – the stated interests of member states. Even although such a broadly conceived “bureaucratic politics” understanding of international organizations provides important insights into the autonomous behavior of international organizations, it tends to systematically overrate the rationality embedded in the operation of organizations. Discrepancies between the rationality invested in organizations and the rationality presumed to be embedded in an organization’s (anarchic) environment then are reconstructed so as to account for a dysfunctional or even “pathological” behavior of international organizations (cf. Barnett and Finnemore 1999). In particular, however, the systems theoretical conceptualization of organizations as social systems does suggest that the assumption of organizations as essentially “rational” entities is a highly problematic one. Rather, a systems theoretical approach suggests that the “normal” operation of organizations can be characterized as the operation of decisional programs (including decisions on decisional premises), which can however not be reduced to a commonly shared standard of rationality within or of an organization.

While in the analysis of international politics a perspective which seeks to understand the change of and in international organizations primarily as endogenous change cannot be separated from an understanding of the relations between international organizations and their relevant environments, the former forms a necessary prerequisite of the latter. Only a conceptually rich understanding of how organizations operate can lead to an equally conceptually rich understanding of how they function in their environment.

Of course, the neglect which the IO literature exhibits towards neo-institutionalist post-Weberian and systems theoretical non-Weberian ways of conceptualizing organizations forms but one side of a coin. On the other side, organization theory itself has barely registered international organizations as a relevant subject. This mutual neglect between international organization studies and organization theory complicates matters since it first of all creates an uncertainty regarding the applicability of the relevant concepts. Obviously, an application of concepts from organization theory to the empirical study of international organization must first of all devise a conceptual account which allows us to ask whether and which international organizations in fact *are* organizations in the sense of the theories of applied organizational sociology. It is this central

conceptual issue which up to now has been treated as unproblematic in IO studies: here, it seems as if an international organization is an international organization if it is observed or describes itself as such.

It is this central, implicit assumption of IO studies which is however problematic. In contrast to approaches in “traditional” IO studies, we propose that it is possible to arrive at a conceptually rich understanding of international organizations by not treating them as unquestioned “givens” based on their constitutive elements (members), but by first of all reflecting on the very concept of “organization” in the context of society. By doing this we seek to react to the fact that even sophisticated attempts to conceptualize international organizations in IR remain wedded to a basically realist image of an international system as a “Westphalian” system of states. It follows from this, however, that an understanding of organizations which is derived from reflecting on the “embeddedness” of organizations in society will first of all lead to the basic question of whether and in what respect international organizations can be treated – and studied – as organizations at all. Since we argue that the exogenous effects of organizations partially depend on endogenous change within organizations, it is of crucial analytic importance to be able to identify which international organizations in fact are organizations and which international “organizations” in fact resemble other forms, such as inter-organizational networks, etc. Our leading question thus is: are international organizations organizations? Since this question cannot be answered in a straightforward manner if one ventures beyond the boundaries of a traditional “Westphalian” framework of analysis, it is first of all necessary to inquire into what an organization actually “is” if seen in its “embeddedness,” i.e. its function in and for society. In other words, this means posing the question central to organizational sociology (the role and function of organizations *in society*) anew and again, but with a view to organizations in a society which is not delimited by national boundaries. To approach the issue in this fashion also requires us to identify a conceptual – in this case, societal – framework which transcends the state-centric notion of an “international system.” It is in this sense that we seek to conceptualize international organizations in a “*world society*.” The aim is thus to further narrow the “deep and persistent” gap between the study of international organizations and the sociology of organizations (cf. Ness and Brechin 1988: 245) by embedding the study of international organizations in a world societal theoretical framework.

This research interest guides the selection of concepts. In this case, this selection is not based on an overview about the vast field of (sociological, economic, political) theories of organizations, but on a focus on concepts taken from the field of *organizational sociology*. Whereas organization theories are interested in understanding the formation and evolution of organizations as such, organizational sociology is primarily interested in understanding how *organizations are embedded and function in society*. Against the goal to utilize such a perspective for studying international organizations, it is however necessary to acknowledge that most approaches in organizational sociology do in fact have “national” societies

in mind. The aim of studying organizations beyond the nation state thus mandates that we only consider that part of organizational sociology in which organizations are seen as organizations *in* a society which is not conceived as an essentially national one. Only thus is it possible to avoid the “territorial trap” (Agnew 1994b) and the kind of methodological nationalism which goes with it and to study organizations in a “global environment.” Within the field of contemporary organizational sociology, *two* theories seem to be equipped with the necessary conceptual vocabulary which enables them to study organizations in such a way. The sociological neo-institutionalism of the so-called “Stanford School” type and the Modern Systems Theory of society of the Luhmannian type *both* provide an account of organizations as organizations *in* society; and both also conceptualize society as *world society*. Yet they differ markedly in the ways in which they do this. Thus, in order to ascertain whether and to what degree these theories can be applied in the present context – and whether and to what degree elements of both can be joined together for analytical purposes – it is first necessary to systematically distill the relevant concepts from these two vast bodies of sociological theorizing and to hold them up against each other.

In the following section, we do this by briefly comparing the two theories’ accounts of the concepts of “world society” (see also the chapter by Thomas in this volume). An explication of the different understandings of world society is not only needed to provide an understanding of the following concepts, however; specifically, it is also needed to illustrate the quite radically different notions of “world society” employed in these theories in contrast to uses of the term in IR theory.

The following section will then concentrate on the neo-institutionalist and systems theoretical accounts of the concept of “organization” and the relation between organizations and their environment. This section provides the necessary basis to identify a possible theoretical synthesis – and the limits thereof – between the neo-institutionalist and the systems theoretical approaches for studying organizations in world society. The central argument here will be that although neo-institutionalism provides a promising basis for a research agenda to study organizations, some basic theoretical issues at the heart of the neo-institutionalist understanding of organizations remain unresolved. We propose to redress those by supplementing them with a systems theoretical understanding of organizations. This leads us to call for an understanding of organizations in two complementary dimensions, which must not, however, be collapsed into each other: an “endogenous dimension,” in which it is necessary to inquire how organizations constitute and reproduce themselves as social systems through deciding on decisional premises and on membership (the systems theoretical dimension); and an “exogenous dimension,” in which it is necessary to inquire how organizations are embedded in and interact with their environment (the neo-institutionalist dimension). The aim is to thereby identify some points at which a conceptually rich discussion between IR and organizational sociology might start, the latter in particular including the view on organizations by Modern Systems Theory.

## **The concept of “world society” in neo-institutionalism and systems theory**

### ***Neo-institutionalism***

Empirically as well as theoretically, the neo-institutionalism of the so-called “Stanford School” stands out against other versions of sociological neo-institutionalism in that it focuses on “macro”-level phenomena beyond the boundaries of the nation state. It conceives of the modern nation state as an organizational phenomenon *within* an essentially stateless world society. This world society comes into existence through a global process of modernization and rationalization which leads to a universal availability of so-called “world cultural models”: “[t]hese models, organized in scientific, professional, and legal analyses of the proper functioning of states, societies, and individuals, are more cognitive and instrumental than expressive” (Meyer *et al.* 1997: 149). In the case of nation states (which thus form the first example of a “globalized” organizational model), these world cultural models lead to and are expressed in a significant similarity (“isomorphism”) between their organizational forms. This isomorphism forms a necessary consequence of a process of modernization and rationalization and is illustrated by Meyer and colleagues by the thought experiment about what would happen if any new “island state” were to come into existence in today’s world society: such an island state would almost inevitably adopt the “world cultural models” and the organizational forms legitimized by it:

Organizations and consultants would flock around our island society, operating almost entirely in terms of scientific and professional (legal, medical, educational) models and methods. Very little would be presented to the island society as a matter of arbitrary cultural imposition; advice would be justified in terms of rational scientific authority.

(Meyer *et al.* 1997: 166)

However, “world society” in this sense is not to be confused with a “meta-level” of social reality, constituted through a commonly shared set of values and norms. Rather, in what loosely resembles an IR structurationist account (cf. Wendt 1999), world society only comes into “existence” through the process of it *being enacted* by the actors who are formed by it. Of course, in today’s world it is not merely nation states that are shaped through world cultural models and through which world society is enacted. Neo-institutionalists have, in particular, pointed to the proliferation of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) as evidence of an increasing density of a “world polity” (Boli and Thomas 1999).

Empirically, the neo-institutionalist “world society” approach moves beyond other neo-institutionalist approaches which have mainly focused on organizations within nation states. Conceptually, it moves beyond both classical realist as well as “neo-institutionalist” accounts in IR theory in that it ascribes no ontological

primacy to either the nation state (organization) or an international system (world society). Nonetheless, it exhibits an important conceptual flaw: although the relation between organizations (nation states) and (world) society is conceptualized as one of co-constitution, neo-institutionalism remains largely silent as to the function of organizations in and for society, as much as it remains silent as to the relation between organizations and whatever else there may be in society. This does, of course, reflect the circumstance that the neo-institutionalist research program is not designed as (nor embedded in) a *theory of society* (cf. Hasse and Krücken 1999) – or if so, only implicitly in a way which conceives of society as basically being an “organization society.” This is not problematic as long as the main research interest is to observe and explain isomorphism. Yet it becomes problematic if the concept recruited for such a purpose provides an account of the emergence of world society through a process of organization and organizational proliferation and, *vice versa*, provides an account of the emergence of and similarity between organizations through reference to (world cultural) “scripts” operating in society.

### ***Systems theory***

Whereas the neo-institutionalist understanding of “world society” may be said to be devised from the observation of empirical trends, but to lack a coherent theory of society, the reverse is true for Modern Systems Theory. Modern Systems Theory is a theory of society. This society:<sup>4</sup>

- is constituted by communication and communication alone. Communication here is however not conceived according to classical linguistic or “sender–receiver” models. It is *the* act constitutive of society and as such is seen independent from a “speaker,” or, for that matter, a “subject.” In addition, “communication” is not a single act but is always a “trinity” of information, message, and understanding. Simplifying grossly, one could say that what systems theory as a theory of society is about is the question of how society evolves so as to guarantee the continuance and acceptance of communication.
- is primarily differentiated functionally. The continuance of communication in function systems is ensured by their operation according to their own distinct “basal codes” (such as “legal/illegal” in the legal system), through their own specific symbolically generalized media of communication (such as “power” in the political system), and according to their own specific programs. The Modern Systems Theory of society makes a radical break from a Parsonian-style functional theory in that it focuses not on the integration of society, but on the ways in which communication can continue. The radical break consists in recruiting the concepts of self-reference and autopoiesis from the natural sciences and adapting them to social theory: all the elements of social systems – communication – are produced within that social system alone; there is no direct interaction between system and

environment, but only internal reconstructions of the environment within systems which therefore are “operatively closed.”<sup>5</sup>

- consists of interaction systems and organizations. Interaction systems are social systems formed at a moment by those present; organizations are operatively closed social systems differentiated from their environment by deciding on membership and by deciding on decisional premises. Organizations are the only social systems that (as systems) can communicate. There is some unclarity in systems theory as to whether function systems are in fact social systems too. It is important to note, however, that interaction systems, organizations and function systems are not mutually exclusive. Thus, for example, communication within and of an organization is always also communication within a function system (i.e. always legal communication, economic communication, political communication, etc.).

Against this background, society is seen by Modern Systems Theory to be a *world society*. It is seen as a world society for two distinct reasons, however: first the *world* provides a necessary phenomenological horizon for the entirety of meaning. It is an ultimate reference point necessary for the purpose of the theory and as such is understood in a purely immanent fashion, without any reference to an “empirical reality”; second, however, there is an empirical-historical reason for seeing society as a world society: if society is constituted by communication then the fact that after the full discovery of the globe all communication can in principle be connected to all communication allows for no quasi-natural distinction between societies (in the plural; see Stichweh 2000a). In particular, *national societies* are merely seen as an – albeit powerful – semantic, and territorial differentiation is identified as the prime form of the *internal* differentiation of the political system (which is functionally differentiated against the economic system, the legal system, etc.). “The state” in this context is the way in which the political system describes itself (Luhmann 2000a: 189ff).

World society in this sense forms the highest-order social system possible; there is no society outside world society. It is constituted by and includes all communication. However, it is not an *integrated* society; rather it achieves its unity solely through its internal – functional – differentiation. Outside of the political system, territorial-regional differentiation only comes into play as a form of differentiation secondary to functional differentiation.

Both neo-institutionalism and Modern Systems Theory operate with notions of a “world society” which differ quite radically from classical models of (national) society and the notions of world society discussed in IR theory (see, for example, Buzan 2001). In neither case is world society defined by being either “territorially demarcated” or “normatively integrated” through some set of norms, a collective identity, or any other notion of community. In Modern Systems Theory, world society is an inclusive marker which refers to the entirety of communication; in neo-institutionalism, it is a set of world cultural models enacted by the various actors within it. Both approaches have been selected in the present context because they account for the social phenomena of interest



here – organizations – in a world societal framework. Yet one cannot easily discard the one in favor of the other; both exhibit apparent weaknesses if put to analytic use: neo-institutionalism can be criticized for not providing a coherent theoretical account of what the unity of a world society it observes is about – whether what is observed is more than a superficial similarity between organizational forms. Modern Systems Theory, on the other hand, provides an extremely coherent, although complex, theory of society. Yet, to put it bluntly, it is not even clear whether most phenomena of interest to students of neo-institutionalism and/or international relations can be fitted into that seemingly encompassing theory. Thus, although there may be good preliminary reasons to expect some analytic value to emanate from both neo-institutionalism and Modern Systems Theory for the study of organizations in world society, it is necessary to take a closer look at how both approaches conceptualize the very concept of “organization” and to assess their specific strengths, weaknesses, and possible conceptual cross-fertilizations.

### **The concept of “organization” and the relation between organizations and their environments in neo-institutionalism and systems theory**

#### **“Organization”**

Within the neo-institutionalist literature, there seems to be no shared understanding of the concept of an “organization,” nor, for that matter, a shared understanding of the term “institution” – and thus also no agreement on the difference and relation between the two.

Without attempting to solve this problem, it is nonetheless possible to say that sociological neo-institutionalism is characterized by taking an *institutional perspective on organizations*,<sup>6</sup> putting an emphasis on shared values, norms, cognitive frames, symbols, myths, etc. In addition, neo-institutionalist approaches can be differentiated into two forms: *one* focuses on institutionalization/institutionalized processes within organizations and thus understands organizations *as* institutions (see, e.g., Selznick 1949; Zucker 1983). In contrast, the *second* approach conceptualizes institutions as external to organizations, i.e. separate from one another, concentrating on processes of institutionalization within organizational environments and their effects on organizations (e.g. Meyer and Rowan 1977).

We basically follow the second of these approaches and clearly differentiate between organizations and institutions. We propose to distill a concept of an “institution” from the great variety of conceptual offers,<sup>7</sup> and to basically conceive of institutions as *societal expectations*, which can be normative, cognitive, as well as regulative (cf. Scott 1995) and thus structure the field of possible action and the ways in which organizations meet specific expectations.

To explicitly distinguish between institutions and organizations in this fashion provides a first handle in order to more closely approach the notion of “organization” in neo-institutionalist thought. Thus understood, neo-institutionalist

approaches concentrate on the relation between organization and environment, the embedding of organizations in their environments, and the question of how organizations – actively or reactively – process institutional expectations. Thus, *neo-institutionalist approaches do not define organizations as such in a positive sense*, yet, in order to demonstrate the novelty of their approach, usually enumerate organizational theories from which they seek to distinguish themselves. In that sense, the notion of organization underlying neo-institutionalist thought can to a large degree only be inferred by reflecting on implicit understandings.

It is in this sense that it is possible to distill a concept of organization from neo-institutionalist approaches without any such explicit definition actually being present in neo-institutionalism. Against the background of the debates in organization theory at the time in which the relevant contributions initiating the neo-institutionalist agenda were first published (see Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1991c) and the stated knowledge interests of these contributions, it seems legitimate to note that basically *organizations are conceived as open, natural systems*, which “place great emphasis on the importance of the environment in determining the structure, behavior, and life chances of organizations: they are clearly open system models. However, the assumption that organizations behave as rational systems is strongly challenged in this work” (Scott 1992: 107f).

It was with this argumentative turn that neo-institutionalist approaches opened a new perspective on organizations and their underlying cultural-societal expectations which organizations have to observe as much as they have to observe technical requirements. This also opened a new perspective on institutions and organizations without putting an emphasis on assumptions of rationality (of organizational structure, behavior, etc.) implied in many other concepts in organization theory.

It is this “turn” against assumptions of rationality underlying the notion of organization which is shared by Modern Systems Theory. On the basis of a general systems theory, Luhmann seeks to develop a concept of organization without relying on its goals or means, without relating to optimizing processes, and without relating to the efficiency calculations of formal hierarchies (cf. Luhmann 1988e).

In contrast to the terminological fuzziness regarding the conceptualization of organizations in neo-institutionalism, Luhmann provides a clear-cut definition of an organization. Of course, Luhmann is not an organization theorist in a narrow sense, he does not attempt to develop a theory of organizations. Luhmann’s thought on organizations is fully integrated into his theory of society and of autopoietic social systems, and thus needs to be viewed in this context.

Within this context, organizations form a specific type of system between interaction systems and the system of (world) society. On this basis, Luhmann develops his complex view on “organizations,” which refers first to the relations between organizations and society, second to the relations between organizations and interaction systems, and third to the “internal” characteristics of organizations in opposition to their environments.

Organizations emerge in the general context of society (as social systems based on “decisions”), and assume an important function in society’s function systems: within a functionally differentiated society, they assume the task of reducing the complexity of function systems; they are, however, not complex enough to replace society’s function systems. This means that within a sociological theory of society Luhmann distinguishes between society and organization (in function systems), and points out that society itself is not an organization but rather can be described as the closed system of all communication (see Luhmann 1997a: 836).

It is in this sense that Luhmann observes organizations as primary and effective forms to fulfill functions in almost all functionally differentiated systems, such as, for example, companies and banks in the economic system, courts in the legal system, bureaucracies, parties and interest groups in the political system and universities in the scientific system. In fulfilling these functions, organizations adopt the functions systems’ respective binary codes and only *thus* can they be observed in society *as* banks, *as* courts, *as* parties, etc.

Organizations are defined as autopoietic social systems on the basis of *decisions*, whose boundaries are regulated through *membership* (cf. Luhmann 1991a; see also Luhmann 2000b: chapter 3). Entry into and exit from the organizational system is regulated formally. Organization substitutes membership for presence (which is required in interaction systems) and ties membership to specific conditions.

*Membership* is the principle which underlies the formation of organizations as systems and with which organizations define their boundaries towards their outside as well as behavioral expectations towards members on their inside. *Decisions* (or decisional processes), on the other hand, point to the specific functioning of organizations and form the basic, constitutive elements of organizations *as social systems*. Organizations consist of decisions and these decisions are recursively linked to each other (cf. Luhmann 1991a: 339f). Thus, they can be described as autopoietic social systems on the basis of decisions, in which decisions are generated by decisions and behavior and action is communicated in the form of decisions. In this sense, *organizations consist of nothing else than the communication of decisions*<sup>8</sup> (cf. Luhmann 1997a: 833). However, since the variety of possible “decision communication” is wide, organizations need to reduce complexity while, at the same time, ensuring that decisions can connect to previous decisions in the system, ensuring that communication does not come to a halt. Organizations achieve this by communicating decisions within the systems which function as *premises* for other decisions (decisional programs, defining channels of communication, choosing personnel). They thus limit the leeway available for other decisions and thereby serve to structure decisional contexts. Organizational structures thus understood are decisional premises which result from the system’s own decisions and within whose context further decisions are being taken (cf. Luhmann 1988e; 2000b).

The idea that organizations are autopoietic systems is of central importance here. In contrast to the openness of organizations in neo-institutionalist

approaches, this idea emphasizes the delimitation of the system (here: organization) towards an outside through its “referring to itself” (cf. Luhmann 1988e: 166) in and through decisions.

Such a delimitation of the system towards the outside and the emphasis on the autopoiesis of organizations means that organizations (and thus organizational processes and structures) are “closed” against environmental influences, i.e. organizations operate according to their own distinct logic and thus on the basis of self-reference (cf. Hasse and Krücken 1996). However, Luhmann’s idea of closure implies an openness on the other hand: openness is entailed in the system’s self-referential closure, since the system’s openness can be characterized as a condition for the system to be able to communicatively contact its environment. This observation is to be specified further in the sense that organizations are the *only* social systems able to communicate towards the outside: they communicate with other organized social systems in their environment (not with “the environment” in general, however; cf. Luhmann 1997a, 2000b):

This communication towards the outside presupposes autopoiesis on the basis of decisions. Internally, communication can only be produced within the recursive network of decisional activity, i.e. only as decision; otherwise it could not be recognized as [the organization’s] own communication. Communication with the outside thus does not contradict the system’s operative closure; to the contrary, it does presume it. This also explains quite well that organizations’ communications are often flattened to the almost meaningless or exhibit other specifics which are often quite surprising for their environment and can hardly be understood. Organizations prefer to communicate with other organizations and often treat private persons as if they were other organizations, or: as if they were cases for caring which require particular aid and instruction.

(Luhmann 1997a: 834)

This further illustrates that Luhmann’s concept of organizations as organized social systems can only unfold itself in a difference from an environment.

Particularly with a view as to how organizations are “embedded” in and “interact” with society, the conceptualization of the relation between system (organization) and environment assumes a central role. In the following section, we will argue that within a neo-institutionalist perspective, organizations and their environments are seen as basically ontologically distinct from each other, while in systems theory a system can only constitute itself *as a system* on the basis of a difference between system and environment.

### ***Organization–environment relation***

As argued above, it is the particular strength of neo-institutionalist approaches that they combine the observation of relations between organizations and their environment with the notion of “institution.” By doing this, they differ markedly

from other organization theories, such as contingency theory (cf. Lawrence and Lorsch 1973), the resource-dependence approach (cf. Pfeffer and Salancik 1978), or the transaction-costs approach (cf. Williamson 1975); while the latter primarily focus on so-called task environments<sup>9</sup> and their effects on the organization, neo-institutionalist approaches argue that institutional environments<sup>10</sup> of organizations assume significant importance. In this context, it is important to note, however,

- that the distinction between technical and institutional environments is primarily an *analytic* one (see DiMaggio and Powell 1991b; Scott and Meyer 1991); organizations such as schools, for example, which operate in a primarily institutional environment, of course also need to meet criteria of efficiency, while organizations such as companies, which primarily compete in markets, also need to incorporate institutional elements (see Powell 1991: 184).
- that the size and intensity relating to and the confrontations emanating from the demands placed by technical requirements and institutional expectations vary according to specific types of organizations (see Tolbert 1985).
- that both conceptualizations of the environment account for different “forms” of rationality. Demands emanating from technical environments require a classical means–end rationality, while demands emanating from institutional environments emphasize a “softer” kind of rationality which aims at actions and structures being more understandable and acceptable in society.

Thus, the concept of an “environment” in a neo-institutionalist perspective is much broader than what is entailed in the notion of a task environment, for example. It includes cultural systems which themselves contribute to the definition of organizational structures and their legitimization. To reiterate, however, this does not mean that neo-institutionalists deny the influence which technical environments exert on organizations. But they attempt to draw a more comprehensive picture as to which societal factors influence organizations. In other words: they observe how expectations (frequently described as “myths”) institutionalized within their societal environment are “taken up” and copied (see Hasse and Krücken 1999, 13ff) by organizations – just as if this were a process of incorporating something from the environment into the organization.

Yet it is exactly this idea of neo-institutionalist approaches which leads to a number of potential criticisms. Arguably, at no point do neo-institutionalist approaches arrive at a clear-cut, positive definition of an “organization”: organizations are defined implicitly or explicitly in their dependence on their environment; they thus appear as mere – stylized – “receivers” of cultural/societal expectations, which accept institutionalized expectations. They appear as conformist and passive – as if contained in an “iron cage.” Trying to move beyond these limitations, however, newer approaches (cf. Oliver 1991; Goodstein 1994) in the neo-institutionalist literature have shown that organizations are not

mere recipients of societal expectations, but rather seek to influence and manipulate these expectations, i.e. they seek to actively pursue their own interests in their relevant societal environment (cf. Scott 1995: 13ff).

This view on organizations and their relations to their relevant environments allows us to conceptualize this relation as an *interactive* one and to describe an environment as being not geared solely towards technical requirements and criteria of efficiency. The environments confronting organizations are usually organized themselves (for example the legal environment). This implies that organizations act and react to environments which are composed of organizations, which themselves act and react to their specific environments composed of organizations (see DiMaggio and Powell 1991c: 65). Implied in the neo-institutionalist argument in such a context is an understanding which basically defines organizational environment as that which is not the organization itself. Of course, this does not preclude addressing the ways in which organizations themselves exert influence on their environments, by trying, for example, to influence decisions of other organizations, enrolling the support of powerful actors, etc.

By viewing organizations as open natural systems in their relevant (technical as well as institutional) environments, neo-institutionalism aims at a differentiated understanding of the relation between organization and environment. In this respect, the category of an “institution” is conceived as constructing a link between organization and environment. Unfortunately, however, it seems as if neo-institutionalists do not carry these insights to their proper conclusion: if the various views on the nature of environments are taken together, there is a strong indication that what neo-institutionalists *imply* is that organizations do not exist autonomously, but are embedded in society and societal contexts (be they of an organized nature or not). Understood in this way, neo-institutionalists *are* interested in the relation between organization and society and/or between organizations and societal expectations. It then becomes as noteworthy as much as it is problematic, however, that neo-institutionalist approaches conceptualize institutions independently of societal contexts – and independently of a theory of society. This is all the more surprising as the analytic category of an institution cannot be understood without such a theoretical background: after all, they are to serve as the “link” between organization and society (cf. Türk 1997: 145). Hence, without a legitimation of the category “institution” within the framework of a theory of society, it quickly turns from being an analytical asset to being an analytic burden which merely serves to unnecessarily complicate the analysis of organizations in their relevant environments.

It is against this background that Luhmann seems to offer a deeper insight into the relation between organization and society (or, generally: environment). This is not least due to his conceptualization of organizations as social systems *in difference to* environments, while at the same time rejecting the very notion of an institution as useless if in a theory of society the notion of action is replaced by the notion of communication: this replacement, according to Luhmann, renders the notion of an institution meaningless since the latter primarily refers to the evolution of structures out of action (and not out of communication).

As demonstrated above, Luhmann's notion of organization emphasizes the self-referential closure and thus the autopoietic operation of organizations (according to their own distinct logic) on the basis of decisions, together with an identification of membership as the condition constitutive of organizations. However, the peculiarities of this definition of organizations as social systems can only be appreciated fully if put in the context of the difference between system and environment.

This difference basically implies two important aspects (on the following, cf. Luhmann 2000b). First, organizations as social systems are characterized by self-referential closure since they only rely on system-internal constructs. This makes them autonomous. However, they do not operate in isolation from an environment. Quite to the contrary, closure is a condition for openness in the sense that systems need to *create an openness*: otherwise, there would be nothing against which they could differentiate/demarcate themselves; they could not construct an identity. A system can only constitute itself as a system by differentiating itself from something (an environment). In the language of the Spencer Brownian logic of forms, often used by Luhmann for this purpose: an environment forms the negative correlate, the outside of the system, yet the system itself co-constitutes this outside: thus, organizations *simultaneously* are self-referentially closed and open towards their environment.

Second, such an identity-creating difference between system and environment – which at the same time produces a separation of systems from their environments – also implies that there can be no environment “as such,” since an environment is always and simultaneously constituted with the constitution of the system. Thus, different systems do not refer to the same environments, but only to specific environments constructed by themselves; they thus also decide themselves as to which perturbations generated by their environments they expose themselves and whether and how they seek to exert an influence on the environment.

Starting from the assumption following from this, namely that systems can generate contacts to their environments only through contacts with themselves, this means that the system can detect its environment only as perturbations and that the meaning of perturbations is only established by interpretations internal to the system (i.e. transformation into systems-internal information). Perturbations are created by the fact that in relation to the system the environment is characterized by a higher degree of complexity; systems need to reduce that complexity by deciding on when something counts as an perturbation and on which perturbations (transformed into information) are admitted into the system. There is thus no necessarily causal relation between perturbation and system since perturbations mark a systems-internal state for which there is no necessary correlate in a system's environment (cf. Luhmann 1990a: 40). This also leaves open the question of the intensity of a system's reactions, since it cannot be answered in a general fashion, but only within the individual system itself.

The notion of “information” is closely related to that of “perturbation” here (cf. Luhmann 1984a: 102ff). Information consists of events emanating from the environment which are processed autonomously within the system; only the

system itself will decide whether an event constitutes information or not and how it reacts to it. Thus an event forms a perturbation generated by the environment which is taken by the system to be information if it exerts an influence on the system's structure (i.e. its decisional premises). This means that perturbations – as “surprising” information registered by the system – presuppose the existence of structures which can be perturbed.

In the case of organizations this means that perturbations only become meaningful for the system if they can be related to the decisional context of the system. This is “only the case if the system can detect which difference it makes for its decisional operations if the environment does or doesn't change in one way or another” (Luhmann 1988e: 173).

### **Organizations *in/and* world society**

Both a neo-institutionalist and a systems theoretical approach provide rich conceptual accounts of the role and function of organizations in world society. Both can be differentiated according to how they view organizations as an integral part of (world) society (the perspective of “organizations *in* society”) and how they describe the specific way in which organizations differentiate themselves within and against this society as open or closed systems (the perspective of “organizations *and* society”). As has been shown in the preceding overview, both bodies of theorizing exhibit a number of specific strengths and weaknesses. While it does not seem useful to attempt an integration of these two, it seems nonetheless worthwhile to try to preserve and conjoin some of their respective analytical strengths for the heuristic purpose of attaining a more specific understanding of organizations *in/and* world society, and to derive a number of analytical conclusions from this exercise.

Modern Systems Theory's main strengths lie in its ability to provide a coherent account of organizations within the framework of a theory of (world) society. The application of the concepts of autopoiesis and of organizations as operatively closed social systems, the insight that organizations operate in and by utilizing the basal codes of specific societal function systems, and the proposition that organizations differentiate themselves against their environment by deciding on membership and by deciding on decisional premises allows us to establish a number of clear-cut criteria for observing *how* organizations function in and against their societal environment. Two points seem to be particularly noteworthy in this respect: first, if one seeks to understand change within organizations (the “endogenous” dimension), it seems to be of paramount importance not to assume direct “inputs” from the outside of an organization or to assume one (or more) prevalent “rationality(ies)” to operate in an organization. The change within organizations can only be understood if one focuses on the way in which organizations as social systems ensure the continuance of “decision communication” by deciding on decisional premises. Second, if one seeks to understand how organizations change in world society, two aspects need to be taken into account: on the one hand, the relevant societal environment is



not a “given” which can be observed independently of the organizations of interest; all *relevant* environments are internal constructions of organizations (as autopoietic social systems). On the other hand, organizations need to be viewed in the context of the specific function system whose basal codes they employ. Only the operation within a function system provides organizations with a societal “identity,” so to speak. This aspect will be of particular relevance if “international organizations” are to be contextualized in world society.

Despite these important conceptual pointers, it is important to note that the systems theoretical account of organizations as social systems in a theory of (world) society operates on a level of abstraction which provides considerable, if not insurmountable difficulties for translating it into an empirical perspective on organizations. As has been mentioned, this is due to the fact that Luhmann’s theory is first and foremost a theory of society, not a theory of organizations in the narrow sense of the term.

In contrast, if compared to Modern Systems Theory, it seems as if neo-institutionalist approaches at least partially trade theoretical consistency with respect to the concept of “organization” and the relation between organizations and (world) society for a relative ease with which it can connect to observable empirical phenomena. Arguably, one of the central theoretical unclaritys which remains in neo-institutionalist thought pertains to the usefulness of the very notion of “institution” itself. It seems as if it is possible to acknowledge and study how organizations observe and react to societal expectations without carrying along the agent-centered category of an “institution.” What systems theory has shown in this respect is that the “reaction” of organizations to their environment (and the societal expectations of that environment) can be accounted for without conceptualizing organizations as open systems. Accounting for processes of “copying” of world cultural models by and for ensuing “isomorphisms” between organizations can be achieved without relying on these notions of “institutions” and organizations as open systems. The similarities between organizations observed in this context would then rather seem to be attributable to the way in which organizations utilize and operate on the basis of basal codes, symbolic media of communication and programs peculiar to (world) societal function systems. It is in this sense that we argue that the neo-institutionalist vocabulary provides an empirically rich account of the change of organizations in world society (in an endogenous as well as in an exogenous dimension) which is of high analytical value for observing regularities and similarities between organizations; yet that this analytic vocabulary remains unsatisfactory when irregularities and dissimilarities between organizations need to be accounted for which are due to the operative autonomy of organizations *as* social systems in world society. In other words, again, while arguing against a merger or a choice between a neo-institutionalist and a systems theoretical view on organizations, we seek to preserve a neo-institutionalist macro-perspective on organizations in world society, yet, for heuristic purposes, to recruit insights from a Modern Systems Theory of society in order to shed more light on some intricacies which remain unresolved within the neo-institutionalist framework.

In contrast to “classical” views on international organizations, these conceptual and theoretical deliberations lead to a radically different approach. At first, there is no obvious reason to treat “international organizations” as a separate set of organizations in world society from the very beginning. Building on the theoretical frameworks we have illuminated over the previous pages, the focus is on organizations in world society in general. Given that national boundaries are not seen as constitutive for society (but merely form lines of its internal differentiation), *all* organizations come into the purview of such a perspective. Against this background, however, it becomes possible to pose the question of whether international organizations indeed do form organizations in world society, whether, if the first question is answered affirmatively, there is a common characteristic which justifies tying them together as a single specific set of organizations, and, finally, how they can be studied by building on the neo-institutionalist and systems theoretical insights outlined above.

Against this background, it seems obvious that in order to provide an account of organizations which seeks to conceptualize them as organizations in world society, it is not a sufficient indicator for the existence of an organization thus understood to adopt either the formal definition of international law nor, for that purpose, that the entity in question describes itself as or bears the name of an “organization.” Going back to the conceptualization of Modern Systems Theory, an organization seems to function as an organization in society – and only thus “is” an organization in a world societal perspective – if it differentiates itself against its environment on the basis of membership and if it decides on decisional premises. While the issue of membership seems to be unproblematic at first glance,<sup>11</sup> the question of whether indeed decisions on decisional premises do take place within an international organization or not is of crucial importance in order to identify whether international organizations in fact are organizations (as social systems in society), or whether it would be more apt to describe them as inter-organizational networks (or maybe even simple interaction systems).

Only if international organizations themselves decide on decisional programs, channels of communication and, at least partly, their personnel, it becomes possible to claim that they do in fact function as organizations in the sense that they produce decisions of their own (with effects in and for society) and do not serve as mere fora for other organizations. Of course, international organizations which in this sense “are” organizations may develop out of such fora/inter-organizational networks. It then becomes an issue for empirical research to ask when the relevant boundary – in that case, the autopoietic closure and thus formation of the organization as a social system – is actually crossed. Seen from that perspective, however, there hardly seems to be a “continuum” of “organized-ness” of international organizations. Either they do decide on decisional premises themselves and thus function as organizations or they do not. What may be seen as a rather marginal difference at first in fact assumes a central importance analytically. Only international organizations which in this sense are organizations and not, for example, interaction systems or

inter-organizational networks can “make a difference” in world society by reducing its complexity through the provision of decisions. Such a clear-cut differentiation between organizations and non-organizations also seems to be able to remove some of the difficulties for specifying a research design for studying organizations in world society which seeks to utilize the insights of sociological neo-institutionalism. An internal construction of and a reaction to societal expectations (including those conceived as “world cultural models”) is only possible for “organizations” which indeed are social systems.

Against this background and in the absence of a more systematic empirical inquiry into the field of international organizations to specify more closely which ones in fact are organizations, it seems safe to assume that some of them indeed are organizations and some are not. While the most that can be expected from conducting empirical studies on the basis of such a seemingly banal observation is a more detailed understanding of the number and scope of organizations in contemporary world society – thus supplementing or going beyond IR exercises of “taking stock” of the number of international organizations in a qualitatively different fashion – the question is still left open as to whether there is any theoretical legitimacy to identify those international organizations which in fact “are” organizations as a distinct type or set of organizations – if only for analytic purposes. Both a systems theoretical and a neo-institutionalist understanding would seem to answer that question negatively. Although the idea of a differentiation of world society into function systems and the – more implicit – functional specificity of world cultural models do mean different things, they imply a primacy of a functional rather than a spatial definition of an organization and its relevant environment.

While this theoretically derived assumption can, in the end, only be answered empirically by inquiring into which (organizational) environments are constructed by organizations as their relevant environments, it seems safe to assume that in most cases the relevant environment for an international organization will be other organizations which are part of the same function system.

This chapter has attempted to outline the contours of a theoretical framework for studying organizations in world society and to provide some guidelines relevant for contextualizing “international organizations” in that world society. Against traditional conceptualizations of international organizations and organization theory, the reflection on some of the theoretical intricacies involved in that exercise have, for the time being, led to what may appear as an analytical complexification of things. However, it has been the central assumption and starting point of this contribution that in order to arrive at an understanding of organizations in a world society which cannot be modelled according to the simple model of a “Westphalian” international system, such a complexification can and must not be avoided; rather, it is the price to be paid for arriving at a theoretically more precise understanding of the internal dynamics of that world society.

## Notes

- 1 The literature on the subject is too comprehensive to be listed here in an exhaustive fashion; see, as an overview, Archer 2001.
- 2 See the documents at <http://www.uia.org>
- 3 Exceptions here confirm the rule; particularly noteworthy is the contribution from Ness and Brechin (1988) (“Bridging the Gap: International Organizations as Organizations”). Yet, Ness and Brechin also do not approach the question as to whether international organizations, if seen from the perspective of organization theory, are organizations at all.
- 4 See Luhmann 1995a, 1997a.
- 5 Meyer and Rowan 1977 speaks about “institutionalized organizations” in this respect.
- 6 “Not norms and values, but taken-for-granted scripts, rules, and classifications are the stuff of which institutions are made” (DiMaggio and Powell 1991b: 15).
- 7 Decisions are events that thematize themselves as contingent, events which appear at a certain point in time and disappear immediately with their appearance (cf. Luhmann 1991a).
- 8 Task environments are defined by Scott and Meyer as follows:

Those in which a product or service is produced and exchanged in a market such that organizations are rewarded for effective and efficient control of their production system. ... Organizations operating in such environments are expected to concentrate their energies on controlling and coordinating their technical processes and are likely to attempt to buffer or protect these core processes from environmental disturbances.

(Scott and Meyer 1991: 111)
- 9 Institutional environments are defined by Scott and Meyer as follows:

Institutional environments are, by definition, those characterized by the elaboration of rules and requirements to which individual organizations must conform if they are to receive support and legitimacy. The requirements may stem from regulatory agencies authorized by the nation-state, from professional or trade associations, from generalized systems that define how specific types of organizations are to conduct themselves, and similar sources. Whatever the source, organizations are rewarded for conforming to these rules or beliefs.

(Scott and Meyer 1991: 111).
- 10 Yet, upon secondary inspection, it is necessary in relation to international organizations to always clearly differentiate between membership rules for states and those for individuals.

# 13 Governance in a world society

## The perspective of systems theory

*Dieter Kerwer*

### **Introduction**

What can Luhmannian systems theory contribute to the analysis of governance beyond the nation state? Given the richness of this theory, the focus will be exclusively on its conceptualization of modern society, a major concern of systems theory. In this chapter, I assume that autopoietic systems theory is not a theory in the sense of the classical philosophy of science. Neither does it propose a set of causal hypotheses which could be easily checked by empirical research, nor are we dealing with social science models which could be assessed by their deductive consistency or the realism of their assumptions. Instead, I view systems theory as a conceptual framework that constitutes a specific perspective of the social world. This has important consequences for applying systems theory to analyzing political processes. In the following my lead question will be, what new perspective on world politics does systems theory offer? More specifically, how does the systems theoretical concept of society frame the problem of political decision-making in a globalizing world? Furthermore, instead of trying to answer the question whether the theory is right or wrong, I will be interested in its performance. Does it offer new and interesting insights to the problem of governance beyond the nation state? Does it lead to a constructive research agenda, or is it merely an artistic exercise of doubtful use, as some critics claim (see e.g. Esser 1992).

As shall be shown, systems theory does suggest a different perspective on the problem of global governance. Briefly, the main argument is that systems theory reconceptualizes the spatial contradiction between “national politics” and a “global economy” implicit in the globalization discourse as a contradiction within the structure of society. From the perspective of systems theory “globalization” denominates an increasing conflict between two opposing orientations towards the future (cf. Luhmann 1982b). Policy-making depends on creating rules which are authoritative in spite of an ever-changing real world. But in the realms of economy, as well as science and technology, the normative orientation of politics is confronted with the logic of continual innovation and learning. The political problem of globalization is thus to make rules for a realm in which rules only make sense as obstacles to innovation. The problem of the different degrees

of spatial boundedness of the polity and the economy is secondary to the contradiction between normative and cognitive orientations and can be explained with reference to these different orientations. Conceptualizing globalization as a contradiction between different spheres of society leads to a research program that focuses on the question of what forms of governance are adequate under these conditions. It focuses on the structural dimension of governance. In the following, I want to develop the view implicit in this ilk of systems theory – namely, that globalization is riddled by “social contradiction.” I shall first highlight a few aspects of the theory of society and point out how this context limits the possibilities of global governance. This will be followed by a sketch of the systems theoretical research perspective, based on this basic conceptualization. I will then compare the systems theoretical perspective of global governance with more traditional approaches in International Relations. Finally, I shall conclude by assessing the contribution of systems theory to the research on governance in a globalizing world.

### **Functional differentiation of world society**

The perspective of systems theory on globalization is based on a particular theory of society. The social contradictions leading to the problematic of political globalization are located at this level. It is therefore essential to describe the theory of society before it is possible to talk about politics. Of course, it is impossible to present the theory here in its entirety or even to adequately summarize it. I therefore just want to highlight a couple of fundamental concepts, albeit without seeking to do justice to the whole edifice.

One of the major tasks of the academic discipline of sociology has been to understand the basic features of modern society in depth (e.g. Giddens 1990), but so far no consensus has emerged about a theory of modern society. Still, some recurring themes can be readily identified. Probably the single most important concept of a theory of society is that of “differentiation.” From the time of the sociological classics, it has been commonly observed that modern society is differentiated into a plurality of social spheres, which allow individual goals to be pursued very efficiently, but which may undermine the traditional cohesion of society. The paradigmatic case is the rise of a capitalist economy, which established the profit motive and produced enormous social upheaval as a consequence. The subsequent problem following from differentiation is integration: how could the different parts be brought together as a coherent whole again? The answer usually given entailed that some kind of common norms or values would be needed to reintegrate the parts (see e.g. Schimank 1996).

Systems theory continues this theoretical tradition, but it modifies the concept of differentiation in an important way. The *functional differentiation* of society means that the largest social system is internally differentiated into a plurality of subsystems, which perform different functions for society as a whole. Among the more readily identifiable subsystems are: the economic system, the legal system, the system of science, the religious system – and also the political system. The

second innovation with respect to the past is that these functional subsystems of society are rigorously *autonomous*. They continually reproduce themselves according to their own specialized language with a particular grammar and vocabulary. For example, the modern economy is a system that reproduces itself continuously by monetary transactions. Autonomous social subsystems are preoccupied with their own performance regardless of negative externalities that they produce. What makes the break with the past even more radical is the decision to conceptualize traditional integration spheres, such as religion, education, the production of knowledge with the use of science, or even families (e.g. Habermas 1981), as merely different functional subsystems, which externalize negative effects by maximizing their performance. For example the system of education does not necessarily produce obedient citizens, who fulfill their roles; by continually extending the time people spend in education and producing expectations that cannot be fulfilled in later life, it also produces negative externalities. This type of horizontal differentiation into functional subsystems leaves society without a strong integration mechanism. This has dramatic consequences for problems where solutions would require system coordination, such as environmental pollution. There is no in-built guarantee that modern society is viable (cf. Luhmann 1988b), let alone that a “good society” can be constructed. This stands in stark contrast to traditional social thinking, which has assumed a drift towards a stable equilibrium of society.

The second important feature about the systems theoretical concept of society is that it is conceived of as a *world society* (cf. Luhmann 1982b). The starting point for thinking about the global dimension of society is the indisputable fact that world-wide communicative contacts are possible. This point could be illustrated nicely by the number of people in the world that we could contact directly with a phone call. Since in systems theory society is the most encompassing system of communication, this observation suggests that society has become a single world system. World society conceived of in this way is only a couple of centuries old. Throughout the history of mankind, there have been a plurality of societies which did not know very much, if anything at all, about each other. This situation changed radically with the development of new distribution media, most importantly the invention of the printing press (cf. Luhmann 1997a: 314–315). Another precondition for world-wide communication – the absence of war and violence – has also been achieved, albeit to a lesser extent (cf. Luhmann 1997a: 1055).

Thinking about the global dimension in this way marks a radical break with the past. By defining society as the largest autonomous social unit, Luhmann appears to follow traditional thinking about society. However, his notion of autonomy differs substantially. Whereas traditional social theory conceives of a society as being autonomous by virtue of a political constitution, a collective action-capacity and integration through common norms and values, systems theory regards a system as being autonomous whenever it can organize its perpetual autopoietic reproduction (cf. Luhmann 1995d). Another implicit traditional assumption linked to the concept of society is the idea that there is a certain degree of homogeneity of living conditions across its territory. These conditions cannot be satisfied at the

global level. There is no world government and the territorial differences found in the world are enormous. For this reason, “world society” is not frequently encountered as a concept. Interestingly enough, even within autopoietic systems theory, the concept is rejected for the same traditional reasons:

Contrary to the position of Niklas Luhmann, I conceive of modern society not as a world society, but still as a unit of social self-organization with territorial and normative boundaries. Only such territorial and normative delimited units are able to base their (self-)steering on structures which are autonomous. Autonomy in this sense is an essential prerequisite for the creation of self-reproductive social systems. The unity of the social sphere, or the sum of the communicative acts would then be ‘world,’ but not society. As long as there is no authority, no procedures and no rules, which set norms for the self-steering of the world as a whole, the talk about world society makes no sense.

(Willke 1997: 9–10)

Luhmann himself acknowledges that the concept of “world society” does indeed contradict the assumption that societies should be autonomous and rather homogeneous. However, such a position does not deny the existence of national societies or nation states or assume that they are no longer important. Rather, it suggests a constructivist perspective which tries to account for the existence of nation states rather than assuming them as given. Systems theory opts for a top-down approach in this matter. Whereas the first nation states were founded in bottom-up processes of (violent) state building, their *raison d'être* has changed. Presently, nation states are constituted from above. Nation states are the form in which world politics is cast (cf. Luhmann 1998). The interdependencies, but especially the need to contain violence, make it essential to find “someone who is in charge” of a specific territory. Thus, an expansion of world politics does not lead to the obsolescence of the nation state but presupposes its existence. The underlying assumption is a positive sum game, not a zero sum game. This position explains why nation states persist, even if they do not perform the functions usually assigned to them. Not only do states survive despite the failure to supply basic public goods, they even survive if they fail in their core business to monopolize violence. The existence of states is only seriously challenged if a competing power arises. None of this denies that states have to be delimited territorially in order to increase the chances of consensus in political decisions. In a world polity, the Chinese will always win an election against the Dutch, therefore the latter would not agree to live in a permanent community with the former. Still, the legitimacy of the last resort is supplied by the international community of states and not by the national electorate.

The position of systems theory towards the nation state has to be qualified in another way as well. According to systems theory, states are definitely entering a post-nationalistic phase (cf. Luhmann 1997a: 1045–1055). Nation states are rapidly becoming mere territorially delimited national states. The idea of a



single nation or nationalism is becoming less important. Nationalism is seen as an ideology which facilitated the great structural transformation of society from stratification to functional differentiation. It fulfilled several important functions. Most importantly, it resulted in the assumption of a natural inequality of people being replaced by an assumption of natural equality among the members of the same nation. Thus, it called for the inclusion of everyone in the functional subsystems of society, e.g. the right to vote in spite of illiteracy. However, presently the idea of a nation as a utopia is coming to an end.<sup>1</sup> Ethnic cleansing, as a prerequisite for building a nation state, is increasingly unacceptable. Furthermore, nationalism is ill at ease with democracy. As shown by examples such as Russia and India, democracy cannot easily bridge national divisions. Thus, democratic forms, combined with nationalism, will lead to ever closer units that are barely economically sustainable. And finally, the increasing individualism interferes with instrumentalizing people for a national cause. Nationalism is also becoming less important because of the obsolescence of war: with state of the art technology, wars are no longer means for achieving ends (cf. Luhmann 1997a: 1055). Also, migration increasingly calls into question the fiction of a unified people. Presently, the semantics of “nation” and “nationalism” is still powerful, but it obscures the true structure of society.

### **Political decision-making in the context of a world society**

The main agenda of systems theory is to develop a conceptual framework that captures the most salient structural features of modern society. Functional differentiation, the rise of a single world society, and the redefinition of the role of the nation state are some of the main characteristics of world society that can assist in explaining many specificities of contemporary social problems.<sup>2</sup> In systems theory, these structural features are also relevant for the analysis of political processes. Since political decision-making does not take place above or outside of society, but within the political system, which is an integral part of that society, the structural features of world society do not just cause problems that have to be dealt with politically, they also have an impact on possible solutions. Two effects of the structure of society on public policy-making can be distinguished. The first type of structural constraint arises due to functional differentiation, which means that public policy has to intervene into autonomous subsystems of society in order to be successful. The problem of intervening into autonomous subsystems exists even within the boundaries of the nation state. However, as these boundaries become increasingly permeable, this problem is exacerbated and transformed. This is the second type of constraint on public policy-making. I shall deal with this in this section.

#### ***The limits of steering***

Within systems theory, the theory of society provides the basis from which to observe politics. As already mentioned, politics is seen as a subsystem of society.

Its function is to produce collectively binding decisions. The role of politics in the reproduction of society is rather modest for several reasons.

First, like any other subsystem of society, the political system does not entail any guarantee of rationality. Systems theory subscribes to an image of politics associated with Schumpeter and positive political economy. Contrary to the assumption of normative political theory, the political process does not automatically produce the common good. Politicians do what they have to do to be re-elected, even at the cost of producing negative externalities to society, for example continually increasing costs connected with permanently expanding the welfare state (cf. Luhmann 1981a).

Second, the sphere of the political is defined much more narrowly than usual. The legal system, the third branch of government in classical political theory, is conceptualized as an autonomous system completely separated from politics. Also, the public sphere, for some the arena for political deliberation, is conceptualized as yet another autonomous subsystem, separate from the political sphere and, as a mere “system of mass media,” hardly an unpolluted source of political reason. A considerable amount of “political” activity has migrated to this sphere. Protest movements usually seek to draw attention to problems by activating the media, without explicitly trying to influence the policy process.

Third, the most important limitation of systems theory for politics regards public policy-making itself. Functional differentiation into autonomous subsystems creates system boundaries that establish strict “limits of steering” (cf. Luhmann 1988f). Unless autonomy is abolished in principle (as, for example, with the economy in socialist societies), functional subsystems cannot be controlled from the outside. The effects of attempts at intervening into functional subsystems depend entirely on how the system itself reacts to external perturbations. From this perspective, the hierarchical implementation of policies cannot refer to other societal systems but only to the political system itself. Control, in a cybernetic sense, is only possible within a system, but not across different systems. Thus policy-making and implementation have to be seen as directed not at society but at the political system itself. Systems theory insists that there is a difference between, for example, a policy to reduce youth unemployment and the actual effects this policy will have on the employment policy of firms. This does not exclude the possibility that this program will have an effect. However, this depends on factors that cannot be controlled by public policy-making.<sup>3</sup>

### ***The knowledge society as a context for political decision-making***

From a systems theoretical perspective, the emergence of a world society gives rise to yet another type of constraint due to functional differentiation. In general, functional differentiation implies a potential clash between the logic of operation of all the functional subsystems. With “globalization,” a conflict arises between societal subsystems that are norm-oriented and societal subsystems that are

geared towards permanent innovation (cf. Luhmann 1982b). This line of conflict splits the universe of subsystems into two separate sets, the first one consisting mainly of politics and law on the one hand, and the second mainly of economics as well as science and technology on the other. The distinction between these two types of orientation explains rather than presupposes the increasing divergence of the territorial boundaries of functional subsystems. Normative orientation depends on finding consensus, which is only possible within regional limits. A cognitive orientation towards learning implies a permanent drive to transcend regional boundaries in order to make a profit or to look for problem solutions elsewhere. Thus, globalization is seen as a conflict-driven process which simply expresses a basic structural feature of modern society, namely the divergence between a normative and a cognitive orientation of societal subsystems.

More recently, these speculations about cognitive and normative orientations have been translated into a conceptual and empirical research program. In this program, the fact that cognitive structures are increasingly more important than normative ones is operationalized, and it is argued that this is a general trend accompanying the transition towards a *knowledge society* (cf. Willke 1997). This means that the normal operation and reproduction of all societal subsystems increasingly depends on specialized knowledge (cf. Willke 1997: 39). Indicators at different levels of social reality point to the fact that we are presently witnessing such a transformation (cf. Willke 1997: chapter 1). At the level of the individual, formal training is becoming more intensive and extends throughout the entire life cycle. At the level of organizations, there is increasingly a search for organizational intelligence, evident, for example, in the improvement of knowledge management – the retrieval and elaboration of information (cf. Willke 1998b). At the level of societal subsystems, the transformation towards a knowledge society has been most intensely debated in the economy. Advocates of the “new knowledge economy” point to the increasing importance of electronic data processing and telecommunication, the overwhelming importance of knowledge as a factor of production in products such as microchips or pills (compared to the almost negligible cost of raw material and production), and the increasing importance of knowledge firms, e.g. management consultants or credit-rating agencies. From a systems theoretical perspective, the increasing importance of knowledge undermines the traditional mode of operating the economic system, which always relied on the production costs as an indicator to assist in putting a price tag on a product.

The problem that arises for political action is: how can the state intervene into knowledge-based systems such as the modern economy to define a common good? The answer is: as a supervisor mediating knowledge production and not as a state with superior knowledge (cf. Willke 1997). Thus, the focus of attention turns to a change in the structure or even the logic of political decision-making and is no longer focused on changes in a “global sphere” above the nation state. The important research agenda resulting from this perspective subsequently consists in further examining the ways in which the knowledge society operates and specifying the characteristics of governance structures that could be effective in such an environment.

To conclude, at first sight, the research program for the knowledge society seems to be irrelevant for the study of politics in the era of globalization. Yet, this first appearance is based on a misunderstanding. Systems theory translates the issue of “globalization” into a hypothesis about how this affects society as a whole. Systems that globalize transform their own structure: they are now increasingly based on knowledge (cf. Luhmann 1982b; Willke 1997: 285–288). The problem of the knowledge society calls for state supervision of societal self-organization. In fact, it is hard for systems theory to think of the problem of globalization as a problem that could be analyzed as a separate issue. Rather, from this perspective, globalization leads to a new variation of the old problem of successful policy-making.

### **Systems theory and international relations**

The perspective of systems theory towards studying world politics stands in stark contrast to the common perspectives in the political science sub-discipline of “International Relations.” It is probably fair to say that “International Relations” is still largely preoccupied with how states can overcome the anarchical state of nature in the international realm. Even where it is dealing with issues of governance, which are beyond war and security, and even if the existence of private actors is acknowledged, it is ultimately states and their mutual relationships that matter (cf. Risse 2002). From the perspective of systems theory, it is questionable to analyze world politics by focusing on the international relations between states. In the few comments on the subject he makes, Luhmann outrightly dismisses this approach and the research agenda it entails: it is methodologically misguided to assign prime status to “international relations” because the sum of all possible relations between existing countries is too high and does not reveal a lot about the real structures of world politics. It is theoretically misguided because inter-state coordination is not where the main potential for political problem-solving at a global level resides. With respect to how internationally binding rules could originate, he remarks:

How should we think about the genesis of world law? Obviously not in the form of treaties between states, which after long diplomatic negotiations have barely any substance left. And even less so in the form of decisions or programmatic pronouncements of international organisations, which exist on paper only.

(Luhmann 1999: 250)

Systems theory’s skepticism about “international relations” is not arbitrary: it follows directly from the theoretical premises. The world political system is differentiated into structurally equal segments of national political systems. The function of collectively binding decisions can only be fulfilled within the realm of a full-fledged national political system. Systems theory is based on an uncommon image of political decision-making. The more common image of

the order of international decision-making is that of a multi-level system consisting of hierarchical layers of local, regional, national and global governance, expressing the range of decisional impact according to geographical scale. This image of an “exclusive hierarchy” contrasts with systems theory’s image of the order of world politics as an “inclusive hierarchy” (for this distinction see Stichweh 1995). Systems theory suggests applying a typology of different systems – interaction, organization and society (cf. Luhmann 1986d). According to this typology, organizations are “smaller” systems nested in the “larger” societal subsystems, which in turn are nested in the all-encompassing societal system. Furthermore, international communication can only take place at the organizational level because only organizations have the capacity for collective communication. Thus, in the terminology of systems theory, “international relations” are primarily relations between units of the national administrations. Even if these relationships are bolstered by international governmental organizations, they remain subordinate to national politics.<sup>4</sup> At the level of societal subsystems, international relations do not come into the picture, since in world politics, there is no extra “world sphere of communication” next to the “national sphere of communication.” In the light of these terminological decisions, the focus of the sub-discipline of International Relations on the problem of co-operation of states in an anarchical environment (cf. Keohane 1984) is misplaced. Systems theory suggests that these co-operative arrangements play a minor role. Given that decision-making at the international level cannot be collectively binding, more co-operation might not contribute to better fulfilling of the function of politics. More co-operation, i.e. in the sense of increasing the volume of decision-making, is not impossible. Once institutions aiming at international co-operation are based on organizations rather than on (bilateral) treaties, the volume of decision-making can increase dramatically.<sup>5</sup> However, this increasing volume in decision-making leads to a problem: how can the decisions be made collectively binding? How can they resonate enough within the full-fledged societal subsystem of politics? As international co-operation becomes more intense, weaknesses in implementation might well become more visible. It is not unreasonable to expect an increase rather than a decrease in conflicts, once international decision-making touches upon more issue areas, involves more actors and tries to cover longer time spans. Still, whatever the mechanism, this train of thought suggests a strict limit to the growth of international co-operation. Possibly, there are two strategies to achieve sustainability in international decision-making. A modest strategy would require limiting the scale and scope of international decision-making. The second option would be to accept a situation in which there is a loose coupling between international and national decision-making. This could be called a strategy of hypocrisy, in which international talk and national action would diverge.<sup>6</sup> However, this is only possible if expectations about and demands on “implementation” and “compliance” are reduced.<sup>7</sup> According to systems theory, increasing the likelihood that international political decisions will make a difference at the national level is not an option, since attempts at

steering cannot address the basic structural features of societal subsystems (cf. Luhmann 1988f). This theoretical argument is also confirmed empirically. For international decision-making, the world political environment is a given. Its evolution and change cannot be controlled from the realm of international political decision-making.<sup>8</sup> To conclude, the structural features of the political world system suggest that international relations will not play a strong role in bringing about collectively binding decision-making.

Another important International Relations approach that is difficult to reconcile with systems theoretical thinking is the one based on the idea of a normative integration of a system of states. In accord with the concept of “international society,” international relations are perceived as a system consisting of a plurality of states that are integrated by common norms (e.g. Bull 1995 [1977]; Kratochwil 1989; see also the chapter by Brown in this volume). These common norms, to which states have committed themselves, have evolved because political problem-solving has increasingly required international co-operation (cf. Mayer *et al.* 1993: 394–395). This is not only true for security but also for a host of other kinds of economic and environmental problem-solving as well. If these norms are issue specific, they are called “regimes.” In accord with this perspective, international relations are not necessarily plagued by a persistent state of nature usually called “anarchy,” where co-operation is restricted to the interests of the dominant powers. Presently, there is a lot of evidence that this approach can point to the fact that international relations have become a thick web of co-operation. Reasoning exclusively in terms of power and self-interest seems to be an anachronism for two reasons (cf. Czempiel 1999). Empirically, it systematically downplays the forms of co-operation that have evolved. Normatively, the problem is that it systematically underestimates the quantity and quality of co-operation that has become possible.

How does this line of reasoning compare with systems theory? At a more superficial level, the perspectives appear to be similar. This becomes visible if “international society” is simply replaced by “world political system.” Systems theory, too, frames world politics as a system of states with emerging properties: states are seen to be constituted from above (cf. Luhmann 1998). However, at a deeper level there are also important incompatibilities. Some aspects have been mentioned before, such as the problem resulting from the fact that world politics relies on the form of the national state. Maybe most importantly, systems theory does not subscribe to the view implicit to the international society approach that increasing interdependencies will automatically lead to more common problem-solving. As opposed to classical sociology, in the perspective of systems theory there is no natural equilibrium between differentiation and integration. Rather, systems theory presumes that functional differentiation perpetually produces externalities that cannot be solved. In accord with this perspective, modern society is in permanent disequilibrium, a “runaway juggernaut” (Giddens 1990). Thus, there is no reason why increasing interdependencies should automatically lead to more joint problem-solving.

## Conclusion

Luhmann's version of systems theory is an attempt to continue the tradition of the sociological classics, to capture the core structural features of modern society. Whether and to what extent effective and democratic governance is possible in such a society is not a prime concern of this theory. Its main contribution to governance is negative: it stresses the unlikelihood that governance can succeed in a modern world society. Governance in a world society is subject to serious "steering limits." If it wants to overcome these, it has to adapt its decision-making style so as to influence the knowledge structures that are essential for the reproduction of the modern world society, which is increasingly becoming a knowledge society. The focus of interest is thus not primarily on the problems of international co-operation between states, but rather on the general transformation of governance, which affects all levels of political decision-making. Systems theory relegates the core concern of the sub-discipline of International Relations to a secondary place.

This chapter has focused on political decision-making as a source of governance in world society. Systems theory has also contributed by widening the perspective to include functional alternatives to political governance. Another subsystem promoting global governance is the legal system (cf. Luhmann 1998). Systems theory points to the fact that the weak global institutionalization of the legal system has been subverted by the use of national law. Increasingly, internationally binding legal rules originate in a two-stage process: at the international level, the protests of individuals and organizations, which point to morally unacceptable problems, such as violations of human rights, are increasingly picked up by the mass media; the originating proto-norms can then subsequently find their way into national legal systems. Another solution to the weak internationalization of public international law identified by systems theory resides in a new form of legal pluralism in which systems of global reach, such as trade or the Internet, develop the capacity to make and implement law independently of state law. The advantage of this mode of rule-making is that the dependency on the integrity of national legal systems is reduced (cf. Teubner, forthcoming).

To conclude, according to the criteria advanced in the introduction, systems theory performs quite well. Reframing the problem of governance in world society so that it is possible to see it as the political challenge to influence fundamental knowledge structures, and taking the unusual alternatives to global political governance offered by the legal system into consideration, a fresh perspective on the issue of governance in world society can be seen as coming into purview. Further empirical and conceptual research will show how fruitful systems theoretical inspirations are in this respect.

## Notes

- 1 For a dissenting opinion close to systems theory, see Hahn 1993.
- 2 Another important structural feature is the phenomenon of regionally different chances of access to the functional subsystems of world society and the resulting

phenomenon of regional exclusion (Luhmann 1997a). This problem regards the periphery of world society, the so-called less developed countries. It is not treated here because the discussion is limited to problems regarding advanced industrial countries.

- 3 Systems theoretic skepticism regarding the possibility of effective public policy-making has challenged political science, which has frequently taken the possibility of governance for granted. This challenge is at the origin of the “debate on political steering” in German political science and sociology. For an important exchange of arguments on political steering see Luhmann (1988f) and the rejoinder by Scharpf (1989); for a more general description of the system theoretic challenge to political science see von Beyme 1991; and for a programmatic statement on an alternative approach to steering see Mayntz and Scharpf 1995.
- 4 According to the terminology of systems theory, two other important types of international organizations, international non-governmental organizations and transnational co-operations are neither part of the international relations among states nor of the political system. The former belong to the system of mass media, the latter to the economic system.
- 5 For this argument with an explicit reference to systems theory, see Gehring 1998.
- 6 For this terminology, see Brunsson 1989.
- 7 For a recent example of IR compliance research see Neyer and Zürn (2001).
- 8 An exception that confirms the rule is the European Union, where national courts can enforce EU law. However, this is an arrangement only likely to work in the realm of intense regional co-operation in some ways resembling a nation-state.



# 14 Constructivism and International Relations

An analysis of Luhmann's conceptualization of power<sup>1</sup>

*Stefano Guzzini*

## Prologue

Given the recent sociological turn in International Relations (IR) theory, usually labelled “constructivism,” it is hardly surprising that more seemingly remote theories are also joining the stage, such as Niklas Luhmann's systems theory. For there are good reasons for IR theoreticians to have a closer look. First, Luhmann's theorizing of self-reference and “reflexivity” – crucial for constructivists (cf. Guzzini 2000a), and others too – cuts across all his theory in an extent perhaps unparalleled by another social theory. His theory is based on operationally closed, self-referring, and yet cognitively open social systems. Second, and related, Luhmann insists on a distinct yet parallel treatment of psychic and social systems, and of different social systems, such as politics, economics, law and science, to the effect that his theory necessarily includes a parallel treatment of “action,” knowledge and of knowledge production. As a result, his theory allows us to observe in parallel, i.e. it runs an epistemology which is necessarily a sociology of knowledge, besides analyzing how science has become, and functions as, a social system.

His theory therefore shares the main characteristics of constructivism, at least in my reconstruction (cf. Guzzini 2000a; see also Adler 2002), namely

- 1 being particularly sensitive to the distinction between the level of action (proper), the level of observation and the relationship between the two;
- 2 having an epistemological position which stresses the social construction of meaning (and hence knowledge);
- 3 having an ontological position which stresses the construction of social reality.

Power is crucial for constructivist theorizing, since it handles the relationship between the social construction of meaning and the construction of social reality. For constructivists, the categories we use, as they are shared, have an effect on the social world. To some extent, statistical categories “produce” what counts as significant facts, and function as the “authoritative” way of understanding the world. Moreover, human beings – but not natural phenomena – can become

reflexively aware of attributions and influence their action in interaction with them. This “looping effect” (cf. Hacking 1999: 34) is one of the reasons for the importance of “identity” in constructivist writings. And as a final point linking the social construction of knowledge and the construction of social reality, constructivists stress the importance of self-fulfilling prophecies. If money is money and not just paper, because people identify it as such, then it ceases to be so the moment this shared attribution goes missing. When people stop trusting money, money will *through this very action* become untrustworthy. *Realpolitik* becomes political reality not because of the alleged iron laws of world politics, but because of the combined (and sticky) effect of actors believing in its truth (cf. Guzzini 2004).

The initial puzzle for this chapter is, however, that Luhmann’s constructivism-inspired social theory reserves a much more limited place for power. Given this tension, the following analysis has the general purpose of introducing Luhmann’s concept of power as a way to illustrate the different possible strategies to turn a constructivist meta-theoretical commitment into a social theory. This chapter shows that, in comparison with other social theories of the recent sociological turn, which tended to broaden the concept, Luhmann aims at defining power in a narrower way.

This, in turn, relates to a further claim, namely that the role of “media of communication” in Luhmann’s social theory derives from two theoretical inspirations which might produce an internal tension. On the one hand, Luhmann proposes a theory of media of communication. His vision of history, although not teleological, displays a certain logic insofar as social organization is becoming both more complex and also more complex in its dealing with that complexity. As we will see, media of communication are said to have originated historically exactly to handle this complexity. Power is such a medium. Politics, in turn, happens whenever observation takes place with this medium. On the other hand, Luhmann’s theory of social systems has a synchronic element which becomes increasingly important in his latest writings. Here, he takes the differentiation of society into different subsystems for granted and is mainly interested in mapping out their different internal logic of reproduction. In this undertaking, the media of communication, although having a general reference point in society, become intrinsically connected to one particular system, in this case tying (political) power to the political system.

Hence, to put my claim in a different way: whereas a focus on communication and the role media play therein tends to see power in a more diffused way typical for constructivism in IR, the definition of the medium with regard to one particular subsystem provides a narrowing and opens a series of definitional moves which are unusual in recent power analysis, such as the tying of power to negative sanctions only. In a nutshell: power and politics are intrinsically connected, yet in one case, the medium power is the driving force, defining where politics lies in the social system; in the other, the political system encapsulates politics and hence narrows the scope of the medium “power.”

In the next section, I analyze Luhmann’s concept of power as a medium of communication and provide illustrations from IR to show its usefulness for

constructivist analysis. The following section discusses power in Luhmann's theory of social systems. It highlights the definitional strictures arising from tying power to the analysis of one system in particular, strictures which are less useful for constructivist analysis, as illustrated by a very short comparison with Bourdieu's field theory.

### **Power as a medium of communication**

In his 1975 book on power, reprinted without any change in 1988, Luhmann (1988d) bases his understanding of power mainly on the social exchange (cf. Blau 1964) and community power literature (cf. Dahl 1958, 1961; Polsby 1980), which was prominent in the USA at the time. This starting point is unusual for more recent, usually more sociological approaches on power (see the survey in Clegg 1989), which have been criticized for being rather too structuralist (cf. Lukes 1977; Wrong 1988 [1979]). Moreover, this type of literature has an individualist understanding of social interaction and is therefore meta-theoretically incompatible with Luhmann's functionalist approach. Yet, this background offers one good way to apprehend Luhmann's concept of power by following the steps of how he "systemizes" the community power literature. He tries to retain the particular Weberian inspiration and re-conceptualizes it into a systemic social theory.

### ***Power: causal, relational, multidimensional***

The basic inspiration of the community power literature is Max Weber's definition of power as getting somebody else to do something against his or her will. As a result, this literature defines power as a *causal* concept, but not of the earlier mechanic version (e.g. Russell 1960 [1938]). Luhmann explicitly follows Dahl (1968) in taking "will" or preferences seriously. Hence this conceptualization of power needs to refer to both individual and interactive preference rankings and foregone alternatives, i.e. sanctions and cost analysis. Moreover, power is also a *multidimensional* concept insofar as resources in one domain might be of little use in another (a claim with which Luhmann will have some difficulties, see below). Moreover, Dahl would insist that power is a *relational*, not to be confused with a *relative*, concept. In other words, power does not reside in capabilities or resources, but in the effect they can have in the relationship between actors. We can talk about power only if intention has been affected – in the extreme case, will has been broken – in a relationship. As such, power is, finally, a *counterfactual* concept, since it means that action has been affected which would have been different otherwise.

Dahl's concept has been fundamental for the so-called community power literature which is in many ways at odds with Luhmann's social theory. This literature had been written as an open attack against elitist approaches, insisting on the empirical verifiability of power claims (cf. Dahl 1958), a move too positivist and empiricist for Luhmann's meta-theory. Also, this literature is self-consciously methodologically individualist, again something systems theory wants to break with.

### ***The system-theoretical and communicative twist***

Luhmann must give a non-empiricist and non-individualist twist to these conceptualizations of power. Inspired here by Parsons, he defines power as a medium of communication (cf. Luhmann 1988d, 2000a: 18ff). Media of communication, like power or money, are seen to have developed as a response to the rising complexity of modern societies. As throughout his theorizing, Luhmann is interested in the ways in which systems have been able to cope with (and, in turn, generate) increasing complexity. With the development of written communication and its accrued distance between information, understanding and acceptance/refusal, symbolically generated media of communication become necessary, because of their function of reducing complexity and disposing in favor of acceptance. They create motivations for the acceptance of communication, in order to avoid that this distance is perceived as making communication too complicated, or even impossible (although he later parts company with Parsons' general theory, this view is constant throughout, see Luhmann 1990b: 179).

In a later elaboration, Luhmann argues that media of communication originate in particular when the risk arises that communication is not accepted, even though such acceptance would be useful for solving important (for power, political) problems. Luhmann argues that the invention of writing increases the storage capacity of social memory. This heightens the risk of seeing communication refused, since previous refusals are stored and can be mobilized in an impersonal way and without the social control in direct interaction (cf. Luhmann 2000a: 37–38).

Such media function hence as a supplementary institution of language. They represent a “code of generalized symbols” that steer communication and, through this, the transmission of “selection impulses.” So does power affect *alter*'s selection of alternatives through the implicit or explicit threat of negative sanctions. For communication exists only if *ego* or *alter* are affected in their respective “selections” – what an individualist approach would call “choices” or “decisions.” Other media of communication, such as money, truth and love, also affect selections, but on the basis of something else.

In a neo-Weberian vein, power is a symbolically generated medium of communication which presupposes that *both* partners see alternatives whose realization they want to avoid. This Weberian formulation is, however, recast into the framework of his systems theory. The realization of power (*Machtausübung*) arises, when the relation of the communication partners to their alternatives to be avoided (*Vermeidungsalternativen*) is such that *ego* wants to avoid them relatively more than *alter*. Power as a medium links up one combination of alternatives to be avoided with another, yet preferred one. It ensures that this is visible to the communication partners. For Luhmann (1988d: 22) the code of power *communicates* an asymmetrical relation, a causal relationship, and motivates the transmission of selections of action from the more powerful to the less powerful one. It is based on the control of access to negative sanctions (cf. Luhmann 1990b: 157).

There is an important communicative twist in Luhmann's theory, which is quite unique and useful for constructivist theorizing. The twist occurs through a small, but heuristically very consequential move which is perhaps more explicit in later writings: power does not (only) ensure asymmetrical coordination of action, but (also) regulates the communicatively generated *attribution* of causality. "Thus power is present only when the participants define their behavior in correspondence to a corresponding medium of communication" (Luhmann 1990b: 157). Power is not only permitting a certain type of communication, but is itself in fact socially constructed through communication.<sup>2</sup> Still more constructivist, Luhmann (1990b: 163) argues that the process of the causal attribution of power, in turn, has an effect on the actual relationships of power. In other words, despite the apparently technical functionalism, Luhmann's interest in communicative theory leads him to develop a strong vision of the social construction of reality, at least for a while. Only the "social" referent here is not an individualist mind, but intersubjective communication systems and media.

This communicative component allows a constructivist re-reading of IR theorizing, as the next section will illustrate with the discussion of power substitutes.

### ***The substitution of power: illustrations from IR***

Power is simply an attribution of causality in the communication. The exact weighing of alternatives in a relational concept of power is, however, hardly possible for the problem of double contingency. To make such communication possible, it needs therefore to develop substitutes for the medium which would fulfill the same function of stabilizing expectations. Those substitutes, in turn, become a symbolically generated code of power.

Hence substitutes similarly fulfill the task of complexity reduction. For Luhmann, substitutes to power include *hierarchies* (already presupposing a ranking); *history* (attributing power through past events), and related to this, *prestige/status* and *the example of previous significant events*; and finally, *rules deriving from contracts*. In all these cases the direct communicative recourse to power is replaced by a reference to symbols, that normatively oblige all parties and take account of the presupposed power ranking (cf. Luhmann 1988d: 10).

In IR, this idea of substitutes for power has been the daily bread of much theorizing. Hedley Bull (1995 [1977]) referred to the "great powers" (that is to hierarchy) as an *institution* for ordering the anarchical society. Vertzberger (1986) has done much work on the role of history in decision-making including its substitute for actual power realizations. More constructivist inclined scholars refer to the discursive or symbolic construction of power as legitimacy through the mobilization of collective memory (cf. Campbell 1992, 1993; Khong 1992; Weldes 1999). The Cold War obsession of domino theories and "keeping commitments" so visible in the difficult US disengagement in Vietnam only makes sense when we consider the concern about power substitutes, like reputation, which actually cannot be divorced from power as such.

In the very classical understanding of the role of diplomacy, *realpolitik* diplomats, i.e. those who orient their action according to the balance of power, need substitutes that account for power, so as to avoid that its measurement be each time found out, and fought out, on the battlefield. Many of the classical realists have been concerned about the very absence of such a consensus on the practical level. Kissinger, for instance, deplors the fact that with the advent of nuclear weapons the relationship between power and politics has been loosened, and that power has become both more awesome and more “abstract, intangible, elusive” (Kissinger 1969: 61). In his eyes, it was crucial that diplomats came to a shared understanding of power, independent of its actual use. To make the traditional balance-of-power politics and diplomacy work, the central coordinates, references and symbols, such as national interest or power, must have a translatable meaning. For compensations cannot be used to ease tensions if their value is deeply contested; nor can balancing diplomacy have its effect of moderating conflict, if there is no common understanding on the point of equilibrium (for a longer discussion, see Guzzini 1998: chapter 7 and 231ff).

Therefore, during the Cold War, some IR scholars have understood their responsibility in contributing to find commonly acceptable substitutes for power. Daniel Frei (1969) urged his peers in his inaugural lecture to help politicians to come up with a generally (i.e. socially or communicatively) accepted measure of power. Such a measure, which implicitly acknowledges a constructed nature of power, would help to stabilize diplomacy in the Cold War.

Spinning the argument further, Luhmann (1988d: 10–11) claims that, should science ever become able not only to propose substitutes but actually to measure power, this would destroy these substitutes and hence affect reality itself. He feels confident, however, that whatever scientists might come up with, it would be just another set of substitutes and not a real measure of power – and that politics would blissfully ignore it anyway.

## **Power and the political system**

As we have seen in the previous section, power defined as a medium of communication has the potential to be basically everywhere, at least wherever a causal attribution in action or a certain selection in communication is needed. So, Luhmann seems at first sight to go down the road of defining power in a fairly ubiquitous manner. Yet, it is exactly against such approaches, which he finds represented by Bourdieu’s symbolic power, for instance, that Luhmann (2000a: 13–14) wants to narrow down the concept. His theory of social systems provides the way for this move.

### ***Power and the autopoiesis of the political system***

In 1975, Luhmann started with a very wide concept of power which, like all symbolically generated media of communication, is omnipresent in society.

Since this is far less the case in his later writings, it may warrant a central (and lengthy) quote. Opening a chapter on the “social relevance of power,” Luhmann writes:

Like language, symbolically generated media of communication have one necessary systemic reference: society. They pertain to problems of the whole society, and regulate constellations, which are possible at any time and anywhere in society. They cannot be restrained and isolated into subsystems, in the sense, for instance, that truth would play a role only in science, or power only in politics. There are constellations in connection with doubly contingent selectivity, which cannot be eliminated out of the “horizon of possibilities” (*Möglichkeitshorizont*) of human interaction. Wherever humans communicate with each other, there exists the probability of a transfer of selection patterns in one form or another. (A different assumption would be a good sociological definition of entropy.) Wherever humans communicate with each other, there is the probability that they orientate themselves by taking the possibility of a mutual harming into account, thereby having influence on each other. Power is a life-world based universal of social existence.

(Luhmann 1988d: 90)

Although strictly speaking this society-wide reference of power is not given up in his later writings, this section will claim that his focus on *autopoiesis* and the different logics of societal subsystems such as politics or law increasingly ends up entangling certain media with certain systems, here power with politics.

But what exactly is autopoiesis? Luhmann’s social theory distinguishes organic, psychic and social systems. Systems have an internal side and an environment, made up mainly by other systems. Between some social systems there can be special relationships, which Luhmann’s theory calls “structural coupling,” such as that, for example, between the systems of politics and of law. For all their differences, psychic and social systems are conceptualized in an isomorphic way. Functional autopoietic systems come to exist when (1) they reproduce themselves, by (2) following an internal logic driven by a system-specific binary code. For instance, the social system of “science” which has become autonomous in well-differentiated societies, functions (i.e. observes) according to the code “true/untrue.” The system builds up certain expectations about its environment which it then sees confirmed or not, in a binary way.

This quite ingenious conceptualization allows Luhmann to have his cake and eat it, too. On the one hand, it permits an inner logic through an operational closure, since there is one binary code which steers “understanding” from inside the system. On the other hand, the system is cognitively open and not deterministic, since the feedback from the environment, deciphered in the binary way of the code, influences its reproduction.<sup>3</sup>

The move to Luhmann’s theory of social systems has, however, rather profound consequences for the conceptualization of media of communication.

These are consequences which seem at odds with much constructivist theorizing, also in International Relations.

First, and less consequential, it implies for Luhmann, that every reference to humans needs to be replaced by organic, psychic or social systems. That move, which is perfectly coherent within his theory, breaks with the classical conception of how to link up different fields of society. (Human) agents cannot link up, only systems can. Whereas more classical approaches allow for power, money and other phenomena to be used at the same time in an interaction by (human) agents, Luhmann's systems theory must ascribe all this to observation done by different systems. The linkage is done through the simultaneity of observations by different systems. Corruption, for instance, can be observed at the same time as the codes of the legal and political system.<sup>4</sup> As mentioned earlier, if such inter-systemic links are of a certain stability, Luhmann talks of "structural coupling." Yet, structural couplings are again, and must be, a system-internal representation of a certain part of the environment. This reinforces the "inner logic" of the code. All agency is constructed within system via social attributes to persons (understood as artefacts).

Relatedly, this vision of reducing language to communication seems to strip language of the hermeneutic thickness typical of at least some types of constructivism. Let me give as an example his argument with regard to pluralism in his chapter on world society (cf. Luhmann 1997a). He argues that different culturally defined systems in the world cannot be understood by observers who accept this pluralism. Since the observer cannot have a view from somewhere, no Archimedean point, independent of any of these cultures, pluralism must accept an "in-the-world" observation which is at the same time "out-of-the world" and hence becomes self-contradictory. But this argument only follows when understanding is conceived in a non-hermeneutic manner. In this, the argument recalls the classical rebuttal by Bernstein (1983) that Kuhn's (1970 [1962]) incommensurability thesis (and its related holistic theory of meaning) is not, or is less of, a problem for those who conceive of the observer as translator (see also Kuhn 1970). Similarly, in order to conceptualize the observer, Pizzorno (1994 [1993]) has used Simmel's (1908: 509–512) idea of a "stranger," as opposed to a foreigner, defined by being at the same time in and outside of the community. There is no *a priori* reason to believe that the paradox is better resolved through time (observation of observation ...), as Luhmann repeatedly proposes.

But there is a second theoretical move which accomplishes the increasing linkage of power to the political system and less to society as such. Luhmann makes the consequential move to bind specific binary codes which steer the autopoietic reproduction of systems to specific media of communication (cf. Luhmann 1990b: 196). Indeed, media are "coded" in and for the emergence of autonomous social subsystems. Hence, for instance, the medium of communication "truth" is linked to the binary code true/untrue in the autopoiesis of the social system of science, and the medium power is similarly linked to the binary code of power superiority (*Machtüberlegenheit*) and power inferiority (*Machtunterlegenheit*) (cf. Luhmann 2000a: 88f).



Consequently, this seems to do exactly what Luhmann admonishes in this early quote: it ties specific media closer to “their” subsystems. The theory of symbolically generated media of communication and his theory of social systems pull in different directions. In the first, power is tied to a general reference to society which makes it potentially ubiquitous. In the second, it is tied to a binary code of one social subsystem, the political.

***The relationship between power and politics: the case of negative sanctions***

The underlying reason for tying power further to one system has more to do with the logic of Luhmann’s theory of social systems, and less to do with the theory of symbolically generated media of communication. It is this same logic, rather than Luhmann’s theory of media of communication, which leads to a further narrowing of the concept of power: political power is based solely on negative sanctions which, in turn, relate mainly to physical violence.

For Luhmann, power is indeed inextricably connected to negative sanctions, that is, the threat of a punishment, but not to positive sanction or the offer of a reward (cf. Luhmann 1988d: 23, 2000a: 45ff). Positive sanctions are not part of power although they can be turned into such, when they change the preferences of another actor such that he/she perceives the foregoing of the reward as a threat. Power exists only if an action which would have detrimental effects is avoided.

In this context, Luhmann explicitly refers to Baldwin’s analysis (Baldwin 1971) which has been consequential in International Relations. He shares the assessment about the difference between positive and negative sanctions: positive sanctions must be realized to work, negative sanctions have been a failure when they are applied. Yet, he disagrees with Baldwin’s idea of keeping both under a common heading, namely power (cf. Luhmann 1988d: 120, n. 50). Luhmann distinguishes between influence and power: influence can be based on “uncertainty absorption,” “positive and negative sanctions,” but only the last is defined as power (cf. Luhmann 2000a: 43ff).

This is a very consequential move, since it undermines the very Weberian base of the concept of power. The reason why Baldwin makes so much headway on positive sanctions is exactly that classical political science has been too concerned with threats of inducing change in behavior and thereby underplayed the role of other-than-military instruments for conducting foreign policy (cf. Baldwin 1985). If power has to do with getting someone else to do what he or she did not intend to do, then what matters is to change the intention and/or action of the other, not the way this is done. For Luhmann, however, only those means count which threaten a situation one wants to *avoid* and hence it harks back into a very classical, if not realist, political theory. Why?

In his earlier writings, Luhmann thinks that the inclusion of positive sanctions into the concept of power would make it impossible to distinguish between power and other forms of influence enabled by other media of communication

like money – or even love (cf. Luhmann 1988d: 120, n. 50). In his late book on the political system, he develops this thought. He argues that positive sanctions are by-and-large conducted through and with the medium money and have therefore more the form of an exchange (although debatable, this is not pursued here). The economic system is hence the locus which develops the main opportunities for the use of positive sanctions. Although this can be used by the political system, it is nothing specific to it. Indeed, the difference between these sanctions and the main medium attached to them is crucial for understanding the differentiation between the economic and the political system in the first place (cf. Luhmann 2000a: 45–46). For setting something specifically political aside, the “specifically political medium of power” (*ibid.*) is more narrowly defined as related to only negative sanctions.

At this point, Luhmann makes clear that the special role of negative sanctions has to do with the special role of physical violence for understanding politics. For him, violence is both the negation, and yet also the fundamental base, of power. From early on, he follows Parsons’ view that power and constraint (*Zwang*), which in the last resort means physical violence, are antithetic. Let’s mention again that a medium of communication has the role to ensure that alter and ego are not asked every single time to negotiate their relation, to play out all the alternatives they might have. Hence, communication media ensure that some alternatives do not arise, as it were, in order to stabilize expectations about the relationship. Communication must ensure an effect on alter’s action without ego acting itself. By substituting ego’s action for the communicated threat of it, physical violence *replaces* communication itself. Therefore, it cannot be power as such.

Yet, according to Luhmann, the monopolization of physical violence has allowed the political system to emerge in the first place. Moreover, it represents at the same time the extreme case of a power-constitutive alternative that actors would prefer to avoid (cf. Luhmann 1988d: 64). Hence, physical violence becomes a “symbiotic mechanism” which founds power (and no other medium of communication but power), because of its nearly universal applicability and latency (cf. Luhmann 1988d: 62, 2000a: 62).

### ***Luhmann’s link between physical violence and power revisited in IR***

This chapter started by stressing Luhmann’s Weberian concern with power. Part of the post-Weberian literature on power went down the direction of the social exchange literature, as does Luhmann’s earlier more Parsonian systems theory. Here, power is increasingly analyzed in other areas, where even some exchanges can be seen as part of the phenomenon of power, and also through other means, such as consensus built on authority, legitimacy, norms, but also sheer habit. But by now, we have reached another Weberian lineage, important for the lawyer Luhmann: the political realism of German public lawyers in the wake of Weber, Schmitt and Morgenthau (cf. Koskenniemi 2000), where power is likened to constraint and obedience (cf. Luhmann 2000a: 48) and the fascination with

physical violence as the ultimate, but systemically independent, backing of the rule of law is shared.

In this field, IR scholars seem quite at home, since IR has usually been more concerned with the role of violence than much political science. And yet, exactly for this reason, IR offers a series of arguments which seem to undermine Luhmann's "realist" component in his understanding of power.

As mentioned above, Luhmann argues that violence is the ultimate power constituting action alternative, although not power itself. This assumes that violence is always that action which power-inferior actors (or systems) would most prefer to avoid. In other words, Luhmann assumes that the organized form of physical violence is necessarily the most threatening action across domains. But, as wary Soviet governments have shown with regard to *détente* politics, they felt more threatened if competition was played out in economic terms rather than military ones. One could reply that the role of factors other than physical violence was parasitic on the existence of mutually assured destruction (MAD). But this simply reinforces the argument. If MAD indeed had the effect of ruling the ultimate use of force out, then physical violence is only an ultimate threat under certain conditions, namely a primarily military communication. It is not all that difficult to imagine several power relations in which the ultimate threat of physical violence would simply be inefficient: nuclear warheads might not be the right means to influence interest rates of other countries, let alone the ones of allies.

This example points to a series of theoretical reductions in the link between politics, power, negative sanctions, and physical violence, as proposed by Luhmann. The first has to do with what the power literature calls the lacking fungibility of power.<sup>5</sup> Whereas money functions as both standard of value and as measuring rod in the economic system, power cannot do the same for politics (cf. Guzzini 2000b). There are so many substitutes for power exactly because there is no equivalent to money: I might know how to translate butter into guns (via money), but how do I translate population numbers, convertible currencies, universal language and military equipment into each other? The political world is sectorized, and power multidimensional. Since Luhmann uses the analogy of power and money, he is forced to overstress the homogeneity of negative sanctions in which, at least in principle, physical violence can substitute any other form.

This represents, however, a second reduction: the confusion of negative sanctions with physical violence. Negative sanctions are strictly speaking only those things one would like to avoid. As the above-mentioned example shows, this is not necessarily military punishment, not even "in the last resort." IR theorists have struggled with the impact of "amity/enmity" for understanding international relations (cf. Wolfers 1962; Buzan 1991). Based on this, one could formulate a paradox: in enmity relations, usually characterized by a high military or violent component, "de-securitization" – i.e. the moving out of the military agenda – can be a bigger threat for the actor weaker in other spheres (cf. Wæver 1995). In amity relations, however, non-physical threats are bound to be more

efficient. Following the realist creed and taking the ultimate value of physical violence for granted has repeatedly led superpowers to mishandle their relations with their allies (cf. Guzzini 1998: 104–105).

Hence it seems to be the assumptions of Luhmann's political realism in the analysis of power which ask for the equivalence of negative sanctions and physical violence, not his theory of communication media, let alone the development of international relations which is not or no longer a purely Hobbesian international society. But the implications of this critique are wide-ranging. If there are significant political situations, where threats are more efficient if they are not backed by physical violence, but by other means, then, even if we limit power to negative sanctions, the specificity of the political cannot be found there. The theoretical aim of defining power narrowly in order to apprehend the specificity of the political system (and of politics!) sacrifices insights of the power literature for an aim not reached. Trying to define the "political" through power becomes a hindrance for the understanding of power – indeed for the very Luhmannian constructivist insights generated by his theory of media of communication.

### ***Was it necessary? Constructivism and power beyond Luhmann***

Whereas Luhmann's theory of media of communication attaches power to a societal reference, his theory of social systems ties it to the political system. In order to show the specificity of that system, power is moreover reduced to negative sanctions, understood as being based ultimately on physical violence. By distinguishing between positive and negative sanctions, Luhmann tries to carve out a concept of power which is not equivalent to influence and which allows us to define the specificity of the political in modern societies.

He certainly succeeds in narrowing the concept, avoiding the tendency to produce ubiquitous concepts of power. His insistence on physical violence can also serve as a good reminder for constructivist theorizing – not because it would contradict constructivism, but because the very construction of a Hobbesian society, the self-fulfilling prophecies of agents whose identity is intrinsically connected to a definition of politics in terms of violence is less researched than questions of norm diffusion, for instance.

But the theme of this section is whether his aim at defining politics through power enforces a stricture too narrow for power. A short comparison with another social theory compatible with constructivism can illustrate a way of handling power more in line with Luhmann's own communicative approach.

For the present argument, Bourdieu is a good comparison, since his theory is similarly reflexive (cf. Bourdieu 1990) and comes in many regards close to Luhmann's. This applies in particular to his theory of fields which have a similar role as social systems have for Luhmann. A field stands both for a patterned set of practices which suggests competent action in conformity with rules and roles, and for the playing (or battle) field in which agents, endowed with certain field-relevant or irrelevant capital, try to advance their position (cf. Bourdieu 1980).

This social subsystem is, however, not mainly defined by its functionality as compared to the entire system, but relies intrinsically on a historically derived system of shared meanings which define agency and make action intelligible. Its boundaries are an empirical question. Being historical, fields are open and change over time. But their inertia, their habitus (field-specific shared disposition), their internal (open) logic, what Bourdieu calls the *sens* (referring both to “meaning” and “direction”), produces an inward looking reproduction which can take over many of the features of Luhmann’s autopoiesis.<sup>6</sup>

Whereas the theory of fields is not dissimilar to Luhmann’s vision of *social* systems, this is less the case for Bourdieu’s theory of stratification based on his theory of capital. Here is perhaps the biggest difference with Luhmann’s theory of social systems, because these forms of capital both link up different fields, and set them apart, since their role and efficacy are different from one another. In other words, they play a similar role to the societal reference of Luhmann’s media of communication. Bourdieu distinguishes between economic, social, and cultural capital (symbolic capital being a fourth but slightly different notion). Agents are endowed with different amounts of these capitals. Conversely, their capital has not always the same efficacy depending on the context in which it is used. Having lots of economic capital might not be of much use in being well positioned as an artist, although it certainly influences the way the artistic field is structured. Indeed, to some extent the very identity of these fields/subsystems is closely connected to the particular mix of the capital relevant there.

The concept of power which results is therefore varied and multidimensional, and centrally focuses on the component so important for constructivists: the link between the social construction of knowledge and the construction of social reality. “The theory of knowledge is a dimension of political theory because the specific symbolic power to impose the principles of the construction of reality – in particular social reality, is a major dimension of political power” (Bourdieu 1977: 165; see also Bourdieu 2001).

Such a theoretical framework has several advantages for constructivists. First, the not-strictly-materialist definition of capital allows for field-specific analysis and for linking up fields. For this, however, Bourdieu still keeps a concept of an agent, even if individualists might find it over-socialized. Moreover, it also allows for an understanding of hierarchy within and across fields which can coexist with a diffusion of centers of power, similar to Luhmann’s understanding that functional differentiation has turned the world “acentral” and “heterarchic” (Luhmann 1997a: 157). Related to this, Bourdieu’s theory allows us to see power relations in every singly field, without, however, reducing all relations to them. Finally, this field theory allows us to have a more contingent theory of fields/subsystems which is not deduced from a teleology of complexity as in Luhmann’s theory.

In other words, Bourdieu’s analysis divorces the understanding of power from the understanding of the political system. It is curious to see that Luhmann (2000a: 13–14) overlooks this point. He explicitly rejects Bourdieu’s conceptualization of symbolic power, because power so defined is to be found in all parts of

society and hence conflates the political system with society at large. But this only occurs if politics is inextricably linked to the political system which, in turn, is linked to (the medium and code) power – a link which Luhmann makes, but Bourdieu does not.

As a result, Bourdieu also has little trouble countering Luhmann's other critique, namely that such conflation inhibits the study of what has been historically institutionalized under the concept of politics, namely "the politics referring to the state and its decision-making practice." Bourdieu is Weberian enough to assess the specificity of the bureaucratic field and of the state (cf. Bourdieu 1989) without, however, necessarily reducing politics to the political system and the state.

## Epilogue

Luhmann's theory of media of communication presents a unique and elaborate constructivist understanding of power. Based on an internal critique and a comparison with Bourdieu's field theory and concept of symbolic power, this chapter has argued that his theory of social systems, however, unduly restricts these insights by connecting the medium of power to the political system. Whereas in the communicative theory, politics is when observation happens with the medium of power, and has thus a general societal reference, in Luhmann's theory of social systems, power becomes intrinsically connected to negative sanctions and physical violence and to what the state does. The very aim of defining the specificity of the political system through power seems to be Luhmann's guiding cognitive interest, an interest perhaps detrimental for his own constructivist understanding of power.

This epilogue spells out the constructivist idea that political theories are part of the political reality they try to understand and that no definitional choices are therefore innocent. There are some peculiarities about the concept of power which need to be taken into account when making such theoretical choices (for a more detailed account on the nature of conceptual analysis, see Guzzini 2002).

Hence this epilogue is no longer about what power *means*, but what it *does* when it is used in political discourse. As Peter Morriss has argued, power is used in (three) particular contexts to specify "the art of the possible" and to assign blame or responsibility (cf. Morriss 1987: 37–42). Similarly, William Connolly (1974) had earlier argued that there is an irremediable connection between power and responsibility and that calling something an issue of power means "politicizing" it: it implies that things could have been otherwise; it asks for political justification.

This link does not escape Luhmann. He himself notices a relationship between one form of influence, based on "uncertainty absorption" and responsibility (cf. Luhmann 2000a: 43). Moreover, when discussing the reasons for tying the concept of power to the political system and "the politics referring to the state and its decision-making practice," Luhmann claims that a wider concept of symbolic power could apparently make people err in the belief "that such things

could be influenced by criticism or through reforms of state politics” (Luhmann 2000a: 14). Yet, although the state and politics as social practices and institutions are sticky, they are not immutable. Even if Luhmann’s definition of power, by defending politics from justifications apparently undue for his theory, effects a construction of reality that consciously reproduces the prevalent self-definition of the political system.

## Notes

- 1 Earlier drafts of this chapter have been presented at the ECPR Joint Session of Workshops, Copenhagen (April 2000), which included a whole section on reflexivity, and at the 42nd Annual convention of the *International Studies Association* in Chicago (21–25 February 2001). I am particularly thankful to all contributors to this book for their comments and gratefully acknowledge comments and criticisms by Fiona Adamson, Bernt Berger, André Brodosz, Barry Buzan, Lene Hansen, Friedrich Kratochwil, Anna Leander, Michael Merlingen, Gunther Teubner, Ole Wæver, and in particular Oliver Kessler. Perhaps in a way more than usual, the usual disclaimers apply.
- 2 This has been an important theme in the move to more structural/impersonal power concepts in IR. See, for instance Friedrich Kratochwil (1988, in particular 272) and Richard Little (1989). For a discussion, see Guzzini (1993).
- 3 It is perhaps important to add that Luhmann proposes a rather unique and very radical constructivist epistemology here which still allows a minimal realist ontology. The environment is not a neutral ground upon which different visions are tested. It is an amorphous thing of which we only “know” its “reaction” in terms of what the system in its reproduction expects from it. The feedback cannot be likened to a correspondence theory of truth, but corresponds simply as an external check which tells the system (here, science) whether its expectations were confirmed or not. Hence, Luhmann claims to have a constructivist position which differs both from a realist version of a correspondence theory of truth and from an idealist position whose epistemology gives up any reference to reality (see respectively Luhmann 1990c: 260ff and 92f).
- 4 For this point and example, I am indebted to Oliver Kessler.
- 5 The classical statement on the power-money analogy in IR can be found in Arnold Wolfers (1962). For a critique of the fungibility assumption, see Raymond Aron (1962: 97–102), and then in particular David Baldwin (1985, 1989).
- 6 For a more detailed discussion in IR, see Guzzini (2000a), and in International Political Economy (IPE), see Leander (2000).

# 15 Concluding remarks

*Mathias Albert*

In many ways, the chapters in this volume challenge what it means to talk about “international relations” at a time when little can be taken for granted in terms of long-established concepts and theories in the academic discipline of “International Relations.” If seen from such a disciplinary perspective, then the aim of the current book may be understood to be a very modest one indeed. It would thus merely raise one among many other voices currently to be heard which propose novel (and sometimes not so novel) ways to understand how that ever more diffuse realm of “international relations” is constituted, structured, and constructed. The aim is, however, also more than modest in that the present volume not only reinforces one of the many voices to be heard already, but adds a new one in that it inspects the possible uses of Luhmannian Modern Systems Theory for IR. Yet what it underscores is – to carry the musical figure of speech a bit further – that while Luhmann’s work arguably constitutes a rather harmonious and complex kind of genre within contemporary social theory, it can be heard in IR in quite divergent and sometimes dissonant ways. This is not the place to once again enter the argument on whether and how Luhmann’s theory could and should be used in and for IR which has been the theme of the introduction and the first part of the present volume. It should be clear by now that what contemporary IR theory shares with contemporary social theory is that the reception of Modern Systems Theory can range from outright rejection to full-scale adoption; yet that there is a significant space between these two extreme positions in which it can be applied in more modest ways or even used as a toolbox paying little respect to the “purity” of a vast body of theory. Arguably it is particularly this space in between which provides a number of useful insights as to how international relations function as social relations within a world society. Again, this is not the place to repeat the arguments touched upon in the introduction or in the chapters of the present volume. It is of course now up to the reader to listen to the voices raised and to judge whether they sound amenable or not. However, and by way of conclusion, we propose that within this volume three themes emerge particularly strongly which we hope will provide grounds for further discussion.

First, the search for social theories of world society is on. IR theory *is* social theory and as such needs to come up with proper conceptualizations of (global) social relations which cannot meaningfully be delineated by any kind of territorial



imagination. Programmatically this implies a consequent deconstruction of any remnants of “methodological nationalism” (Ulrich Beck) in the discipline and conceptualizations of what can no longer sensibly be described in reference to a “Westphalian” model (even if this only means brandishing it as “post-Westphalian”). In that sense, even the contributions in this volume which remain skeptical as to the uses of Luhmannian theory for IR demonstrate that probably the most stimulating kinds of argument are not between, for example, Modern Systems Theory and realism, but between, for example, systems theoretical and neo-institutionalist notions of world society, or between Luhmannian and Foucauldian concepts of power.

Second, debates on the construction of reality or on constructivism might prove to be outdated, and a powerful (re-)description of international relations should not engage too much with epistemological issues but rather with historically informed analyses of the interplay between (world) societal structure and semantics (see, for example, the chapters by Esmark and Harste). To name but one prominent example, such a shift in attention allows us to leave behind sheer endless debates on either the “persistence” or the “withering away” of the state in a substantial fashion on the one and on the “constructed” or “simulated” nature of the state on the other hand, and rather replaces it with in-depth descriptions of past and present shifts of the way in which the political system of world society describes itself. The semantic self-description of the political system of world society is still very much directed towards the state, but increasingly also comprises other social forms (ranging from INGOs to global governance regimes); the issue is thus not one of what “constitutes” the political system of world society or of the primacy of one or the other form, but one of a proper description of an ever-changing plurality of forms.

Third, while arguably the present volume is biased towards inspecting the uses of Modern Systems Theory of IR, there is a powerful line of argument running in a different direction in that it argues for the registration of what is said and done in IR by Modern Systems Theory. As argued at many points throughout this volume, Modern Systems Theory so far has largely turned a blind eye to phenomena such as international organizations or issues of war and peace central to IR. It needs to be discussed within Modern Systems Theory whether this is just an expression of a disciplinary (i.e. sociological) bias against international relations, or whether in fact there is a “Westphalian” moment which remains hidden even in Modern Systems Theory in the assertion that the political system of world society is primarily differentiated in a segmentary-territorial fashion.

Modern Systems Theory and International Relations go together extremely well – and they don’t. On the one hand, they make a perfect match in that Modern Systems Theory provides a powerful conceptual vocabulary which allows us to resituate international relations within the context of world society and thus provides an alternative to what by some have been perceived as post-Westphalian confusions. On the other hand, as this volume has shown, the other side of this perfect match is that if one does not reject a modern systems theoret-

ical approach out of hand it is a daunting task to bring such a theory of society and IR theory together *practically* and have them steer a common course in some respects.<sup>1</sup> It is a task which requires efforts from both sides. Yet we hope to have demonstrated with this volume that it is a task worth pursuing.

## Note

- 1 And, to end on a lighter note, one might feel that Luhmann in some sense described this relation between Modern Systems Theory and IR when in one of his surprising more humorous inserts he notes that marriages are made in heaven – yet perish in arguments in cars (“Die Ehen werden im Himmel geschlossen. Im Auto gehen sie auseinander”; Luhmann 1982a: 42).

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