

# Differentiation and World Society: A Note on the Theory of Society by Niklas Luhmann

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## Abstract

The topic of this essay is Niklas Luhmann's theory of society and, in particular, the relationship between differentiation and world society. Based on a reconstruction of the concept of differentiation in systems theory, the form of societal differentiation, and the distinction between primary and secondary forms of differentiation, this paper highlights a weakness of the theory and asks how its abstract level of analysis could be made more connectable to other theories of society. The suggestion is to focus more on the segmentary subdifferentiations of society-wide differentiated function systems in the world society.

**Keywords:** systems theory, society theory, functional differentiation, primary and secondary forms of differentiation, segmentary subdifferentiations

## 1. Introduction

In his theory of society, Niklas Luhmann distinguishes between different forms of differentiation. In this paper, I will address these, paying particular attention to the form of *segmentary differentiation*. When one speaks of this form in modern society, one refers predominantly to the organization level of function systems – that is, the organizations in social subsystems such as politics, education, religion, economics, science, health, and law. These systems depend on organizations, which results from the special relationship between inclusion and exclusion. In modern society, complete exclusion from society is impossible, exclusion from societal subsystems is possible but rare and extremely difficult, but exclusions from organizations are virtually the order of the day. While function systems include all persons and exclude only some, this looks different with organizations: these include only some persons in the form of their members and exclude the rest of the population. From this point of view, there is a complementary relationship between function systems and organizational systems: the more function systems open up for inclusions of all members of society, the more secondary possibilities for exclusion must then be provided within the systems via organizations.

And thus, in modern society, organizations are the empirical place where, in the form of performance roles and/or audience roles, the possibilities of participation in society and its subsystems are administered. One can be a member of one or more organizations as an occupational or honorary performance role or one can receive services as an audience role, be a customer, or an inmate. In modernity, the positioning of individuals in the social space is not directly via the function systems but via their organizations. Which positions in the function systems of society are reserved for individuals, or in other words: how someone gains access to these positions, depends to a large extent on organizations – i.e., segmentary differentiation (see Kurtz, 2006).

Building on an overview of Niklas Luhmann's theory of society based on the focal points of the systems-theoretical concept of differentiation, the form of societal differentiation, and the distinction between primary and secondary forms of differentiation, this paper introductive addresses how the form of segmentary differentiation could be further defined beyond the organizational level: namely, as *segmentary sub-differentiations* of the society-wide differentiated function systems in the world society.

## 2. Differentiation and World Society

The term *differentiation* has been a basic term of sociology and sociological societal theory from the very beginning. While Émile Durkheim emphasized the correlations between the forms of moral solidarity and the extent of the social division of labor, Max Weber described social modernization as the crystallization of different orders of life, each following its own value rationality (see Durkheim, 1902; Weber, 1984/1920). Finally, Georg Simmel explained the emergence of modern individualism without direct reference to Durkheim and Weber as the result of the division of labor, differentiation of roles, and differentiation of functions

(Note 1). And Talcott Parsons, with his linking of Durkheim's analyses of occupational role differentiation and Weber's analyses of the differentiation of societal subareas, then determined occupational roles as a component of the respective societal subsystems. In doing so, he distinguishes occupational roles from kinship roles (see Parsons, 1951, pp.160-161) and highlights the importance of both forms of roles for the stratification system in modern society (cf. Parsons, 1977; 1954). In contrast to these specifications of the sociological tradition, differentiation is understood differently in systems theory. Niklas Luhmann, for example, sees „the decisive move toward modernity not simply in increasing differentiation, but in a change in the primary form of societal differentiation“ (Note 2), and concludes that for the historically late special case of modern society this is the form of *functional differentiation*.

Talcott Parsons also assumed a primacy of functional differentiation in modernity. However, while he understood differentiation as the decomposition of a system into two new systems, which are then environment for each other, Luhmann, in contrast, has freed the differentiation theory from this decomposition paradigm and understood differentiation as system building or system differentiation. Luhmann understands differentiation „as a *replication, within a system, of a difference between a system and its environment*. Differentiation is thus understood as a reflexive and recursive form of system building“ (Luhmann, 1982, pp. 230-231), and the „function of system differentiation can be described as *the enhancement of selectivity*, that is, the increase in available possibilities for variation or choice“ (Luhmann, 1982, p. 231). The starting point is now no longer that of a *unity* – like part in the whole – but that of a *difference*, the difference of system and environment. One does not speak then of a decomposition of a unit into parts, but the total system represents outwardly a delimited environment, in which again new systems can form, but from the existence of a total system, one can *not* infer the subsystems.

Thus, following here the perspective pursued by Luhmann, theory of society means first of all *theory of functional differentiation*. This theory focuses its analysis of society on the primary differentiation of society into functional subsystems, the form of the relationship of these function systems to the system as a whole, the reciprocity of the relationships of the function systems to each other and of the function systems to themselves. Modern society, which is differentiated into communicatively operating global function systems, is described as a *world society* (Note 3), which is plausible if one realizes that communications are not bound to national borders. The world society is thus the totality of all communications, or formulated differently: all communications take place in the world society. So while there are usually no borders for communications, even though they can of course, be hindered in digitalized form, the situation is different for people. These are still bound by national borders: some get in, others have to wait (for a visa to the USA, for example), and still, others are held up, pushed back, and excluded (Note 4).

Luhmann's concept of world society, in any case, sets itself apart from other concepts, such as Immanuel Wallerstein's *world-system* approach, since the latter explains world society primarily in terms of a single social subsystem, without adequately taking into account the importance of other subsystems. Wallerstein states that the modern world-system has been

developing since the 16th century and that already then, a division of labor existed on the world-system level through supraregional trade relations and interdependencies (see Wallerstein, 1974; 1998). But he still assumes a regional rather than a global concept of society. When Wallerstein speaks of world-system, he means „a system of interaction of different regional societies“ (Luhmann, 1997, p. 158 – own translation) and not the independent world society. For Luhmann, on the other hand, there is only one society on the globe: the world-society. For him, it is a „fact that there are no other societies outside the world society anymore. It is a social system without social environment, the social system par excellence, which has only systems of other types outside of it. (...) The environment to which such a societal system would have to adapt itself is determined by the physical, organic, and psychic resources, but not by competitive situations, superiorities and inferiorities, possibilities of expansion and diffusion in the relation of different societal systems to each other“ (Note 5).

### 3. Societal Differentiation

The *form* of societal differentiation determines the complexity of the societal system (see Luhmann, 1980, p. 22). In the course of its evolution, society is determined by different primacies of differentiation – from segmentary, to stratificational, to functional differentiation. In the modern functionally differentiated society, there are of course still classes and strata, but the form of stratification is no longer the primary form of social differentiation.

The *segmentary differentiation* of society is based on an equality (e.g., families), thus reproduces the same units. And so, in the archaic systems, whose primary internal differentiation proceeds according to the principle of segmentation, the boundaries of the interaction system and the societal system overlap. In these primarily segmentary differentiated societies, stratificational and even functional features – such as standardized forms of division of labor following from the natural substrate of age and gender – can nevertheless already be found.

The *stratificatory differentiation* forms a division according to strata, i.e., society postulates or supposes a socially ordered inequality. Luhmann attributes the breakthrough to regionally advanced civilizations to the innovation risk of center and periphery (or urban/rural) and the resulting possibility to evolve stratification and power (Note 6). „In stratified societies, independent evolution of ideas begins, tied to the upper class, or, more precisely, to the strata using writing. Its scope and pace depend very substantially on the writing system and its (semantic and stratification) reach“ (Note 7). Linguistic (oral) communication is tied to systems of the interaction among those present, which is a significant feature of scriptless cultures. However, with the invention of writing, a fundamental restructuring of the societal system can be observed, for it must now be set up for oral *and* written communication (see also Queniart, 1984). And this means that through writing, society is possible even without interaction. Because of writing, communication is linearized, from which it follows that a single initial communication can set in motion very many further communication sequences

via dissemination technologies (Note 8). Besides their stratificational structure (aristocracy, bourgeoisie, peasants), these advanced civilizations also already show approaches to functional differentiation, such as that between religion and politics, and Luhmann describes the efficiency of political regulations as an essential feature of these societies in general.

Finally, *functional differentiation* in modern society selects the members of society according to functional areas (Note 9), so it is thus characterized as socially disordered inequality, and that means that the relationships between the subsystems are no longer socially regulated. It is only through the letterpress that important information is assigned primarily to written communication. In contrast to the other two media (language and writing), book printing is no longer limited to communication within the same social strata – books (information) become accessible to *everyone* –, which Luhmann sees as a precondition for the transformation of the structure of the societal system from stratificational to functional differentiation. The printing of books, which set the modern pace of structural change, also set in motion the process of ever-increasing difference between what can be communicated and what is communicated. In modern society, which since the 18th century has been characterized by a primacy of functional differentiation, it is no longer possible to identify – apart from functional differentiation itself – a uniform overall social order (Note 10).

#### 4. Primary and secondary Forms of Differentiation

Functional differentiation designates only the primary form of differentiation of society in modernity. But precisely, this implies, of course, that society cannot be adequately described on the sole basis of this form of differentiation. In the functionally differentiated world society, other forms of differentiation continue to exist, albeit without overall social effects. In all areas of world society, segmental, stratificational, and functional differentiations can be observed simultaneously. However, there are other primacies in some countries than that of functional differentiation. And if one may believe David Landes' thesis, then perhaps in most countries of the world, the form of functional differentiation in pure form (or better: in differentiated form) will never be reached (see Landes, 1998). But even in our latitudes, cases can be observed where the organization of the political system dominates events. Detlef Pollack, for example, uses the example of state socialism in the former GDR to speak of an organizational society (Pollack, 1990), and with many qualifications, one could perhaps also think of the centralist state apparatus in France (Note 11).

But in the different areas of the world, not only different primacies of differentiation can be observed. In the areas of the world where the functional differentiation primacy has prevailed, the other forms of differentiation can also be found as internal differentiations of the function systems. In all function systems, for example, segmentary subdifferentiations can also be found, and in addition, secondary forms of communication also exist at the levels of interaction and organization in the context of each of the social subsystems: in the educational system, for example, only education and training are provided, but at the same time the educational organizations and performance role holders must also be paid, and these processes are part of the economic activity of modern society (see Kurtz, 2021). In

organizations and interaction systems, communication cannot be limited to the binary guiding distinction of a societal sphere.

Below society's functional differentiation, the elements of stratificational differentiation according to income classes, gender role differentiation, confessions, political influence, social prestige, etc., which are the subject of sociological inequality research, can also be observed. Niklas Luhmann has concluded from this that the alternation of the primary form of social differentiation in the 18th century can be reconstructed as a transition „from stratificatory differentiation to functional differentiation with class formation“ (Luhmann, 1985, p. 132 – own translation). Thus, even the systems theory observer perspective does not claim stratification disappears in modern society. Rather, it is interpreted as a by-product of the individual function systems (cf. Luhmann, 1977; Luhmann & Schorr, 1988, pp. 237-243), which, however, no longer has any functional significance for the function systems. The functionally differentiated society is still characterized by stratification, but these strata become social classes in modernity. In addition to the loss of overall social significance compared to the corporate associations in the Middle Ages with their polyfunctional character, which were economic, political, cultural, religious, to some extent military, jurisdictional, and above all socio-bourgeois centers for their members, it must now be emphasized, however, that in modernity „stratification must give up its grip on interaction among those present“ (Luhmann, 1985, p. 130 – own translation) and „greater freedoms of role combination“ are allowed for individuals (Luhmann, 1985, p. 131 – own translation). The extreme inequalities and serious differences in life chances that can still be found today are now subject to two limitations compared to earlier societal formations (cf. Luhmann, 1995): On the one hand, they determine the conditions only temporarily and can change at any time, and on the other hand, they no longer refer to an integration of society as a whole, since each social subarea interprets these inequalities in a specific way.

The real inequalities that exist today are not only remnants of stratification but also the result of functional societal differentiation (Note 12). Exclusion on the social dimension, like risk on the temporal dimension and ecology on the material dimension, is a consequential problem of functional differentiation respectively societal modernization (Note 13). Social class formation and thus consolidation of social inequality in modernity finds its starting point in the process of destratification when the establishing bourgeoisie contrasted the societal inclusion formula origin with education and money, and in modernity, this reveals itself as a by-product of the rational operation of the educational and economic systems (see Luhmann, 1997, p. 774; Kurtz, 2013).

Due to the fact that each function system has formulated its own inclusion conditions, society is – as Niklas Luhmann points out – in the area of inclusion only loosely integrated. In contrast, society is highly integrated in the exclusion sphere, „because exclusion from one function system quasi automatically entails exclusion from others“ (Luhmann, 1995, p. 259 – own translation). Compared to a stratified society, modern society is – as Luhmann further states elsewhere – „*more integrated into its lowest stratum than in its upper strata*. It can only dispense with degrees of freedom ‚at the bottom‘. Its order, on the other hand, is based on disintegration, on decoupling of the function systems“ (Luhmann, 1997, pp. 631-632 –

own translation). Based on this, Rudolf Stichweh has put forward the thesis that probably only the inclusion side of the societal sub-areas forms a worldwide context, while exclusions among themselves are rather due to local special conditions that are not networked in world society (cf. Stichweh, 1997). And this may be related to segmentary subdifferentiations of the function systems, which vary from region to region, but also stratificational and individualized forms of differentiation.

## 5. Segmentary Subdifferentiations

One of the central topics for a sociological theory of world society now seems to me to be the form of *segmentary subdifferentiation* of function systems, a topic that Niklas Luhmann hinted at but then did not elaborate (Note 14). World society is characterized by a primacy of functional differentiation, but this does not at the same time mean that the individual regions in the world would develop uniformly (see Luhmann, 1993, p. 572-573; and the papers in Hayoz & Stichweh, 2018). But a „primarily regional differentiation would contradict the modern primacy of functional differentiation. It would fail because it is impossible to bind all function systems to uniform spatial boundaries common to all. Regionally differentiable in the form of states is only the political system and with it the legal system of modern society. All others operate independently of spatial boundaries“ (Luhmann, 1997, p. 166 – own translation).

In the monograph *Die Politik der Gesellschaft* („The politics of society“), Luhmann interpreted the nation-state as an organization, for example, since this is the only way it can be enabled to make collectively binding decisions, and concludes from this for politics three levels of differentiation (see Luhmann, 2000, p. 244). The political system of world society operates on the level of functional differentiation. This globally communicatively differentiated function system is segmentary differentiated into territorial states on a second level, and only on a further level do the individual organizations appear (Note 15). This model is just waiting to be transferred to other world-socially differentiated communication systems. The German sociologist Alois Hahn has shown, for example, „that all function systems which have developed since the 16th and into the 19th century are clearly dependent on territorial boundaries“ (Hahn, 2000, p. 59 – own translation). For example, in the sciences, the truth was linked to the respective national languages in which they presented themselves, and the economy was tied to national currencies.

Today, as in the political system, segmentary subdifferentiations can still be found in the other function systems, or to put it differently: each function system has different segmentary formations depending on the nation-state. In Germany, for example, specific segments have emerged as large organizations of the world societal subsystems, which are related to each other: a German segment of the globally communicatively differentiated function systems of economy, science, art, etc., each with its own access modes. The special role of politics in this context is that the states of the political system draw the territorial boundaries for all subsystems of modern world society (Note 16).

The advantage of transferring the segmentary internal differentiation of the political system to other function systems would be that one could take the abstract analyses of the function systems as reference points to observe the segmentary characteristics as variations in the world society. And a side effect of such an elaboration, which should not be underestimated and which could only be hinted at here, lies in a possible connection to other theories of society, namely those which start from society in the plural (national societies), i.e., basically beside the systems theory to all other theories of society (Note 17).

## 6. Concluding Remarks

This contribution was about, with Niklas Luhmann speaking, the on the one hand opposing and on the other hand complementary movements of thought of *generalization* and *respecification*, i.e., about the relation of „ascertainment (in general) and exclusion (in concrete) of functional equivalents“ (Luhmann, 1984, p. 85 – own translation). This shown here at the form of segmentary subdifferentiation of function systems is, of course, not limited to this form but a, so to speak, generalized phenomenon. Thus, already for Talcott Parsons, world complexity is respecified via differentiating social systems, or else one can formulate with Luhmann that generalized belief is respecified via the form of organized churches, via membership generalized organizations respecify themselves via decision programs, and finally, the level of coding of function systems is respecified on the program level (Note 18). This is what systems theory observes in the world, but at the same time, this theory has methodologically adapted to this phenomenon. Luhmann has explained in the monograph *Soziale Systeme* („Social Systems“) that he does not choose the way of forming direct analogies – and this can be interpreted against Durkheim’s organism analogy – but he consistently takes the detour of generalization and respecification quasi as the royal road of sociological systems theory. Social systems constitute the general theory, which is to be respecified, among other things, by the analyses of the individual function systems. And in this paper, we transferred this to the form of internal differentiation of the function systems in the world society, so here it was about a *respecification of the functional differentiation by segmentary differentiation*.

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Luhmann, N. (2013). *Theory of Society, Volume 2*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press (472 pages) [= Luhmann, 1997, Chapter 4-5].



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## Notes

- Note 1. See Simmel, 1989/1890 and expanded Simmel, 1992/1908, chapters 6 and 10.
- Note 2. Luhmann, 1989, p. 155 – own translation. Cf. more precisely also Luhmann, 1977; 1980. I use here and in the following Luhmann's original publications in German. Some translations into English relevant to the topic can be found at the end of the essay.
- Note 3. See Luhmann, 1975; Stichweh, 2000, and Heintz, Münch & Tyrell, 2005 for an overview.
- Note 4. This is why Steffen Mau (2021), for example, also speaks of *borders as sorting machines*. And Donatella di Cesare (2020) argues in this context for a policy of hospitality

and denies any territorial right at all that could justify a policy of generalized rejection at borders.

Note 5. Luhmann, 2017, p. 449 – own translation. This book is one of the early versions of his societal theory from 1975, published from his estate.

Note 6. The distinction between center and periphery functions here as a societal form of differentiation of the transition from still segmentary differentiation (in the countryside) and already stratificational differentiation (in the city). See Luhmann, 1997, pp. 663-678, and especially p. 674.

Note 7. Luhmann, 1980, p. 44 – own translation. Luhmann distinguishes here between the evolution of semantics (evolution of ideas) and the evolution of subsystems.

Note 8. See the chapter on writing in Luhmann, 1997, pp. 249-290.

Note 9. But compared to membership in only one particular stratum or social class, individuals now participate in the material goods of different function systems of society.

Note 10. Therefore, it is assumed here that we are currently still living in the functionally differentiated society and not already in the network society or next society described by Dirk Baecker (2018), which is based on the medium of the Internet-enabled computer.

Note 11. At least, this is how Michel Crozier (1970) describes it for France until the seventies of the last century. However, the fact that the political system in the former GDR and in other communist countries had an influence on other areas of society does not necessarily contradict the thesis of functional differentiation. Even in such centrally governed countries, money can be used without reference to political power and not every political decision can be made about the economy, which may be one of the reasons why the Soviet Union no longer exists.

Note 12. With the consequence of a quasi retrospective differentiation of a function system for social help (see Kurtz, 2004).

Note 13. Interestingly, this is then also the point of intersection where the analyses of systems theory and the so-called theory of reflexive modernization meet – see Beck & Bonß, 2001.

Note 14. And Richard Münch (1998), for example, also sees the world society as characterized by a balancing of global dynamics and local lifeworlds.

Note 15. While in the world society concept of John. W. Meyer, the nation-state is interpreted as a segment of world society (see Meyer et al., 1997), for Luhmann it functions as a segment of the world political system.

Note 16. See Schimank, 2005. The task for further research would of course be to work out for each individual function system the form of the relationship between structural similarities at the level of world society and the regional differences that continue to exist, but this cannot be done here.

Note 17. For example, the system-theoretical approach of Helmut Willke, who does not interpret modern society as a world society, „but still as a territorially and normatively delimited unit of social self-organization“ (Willke, 1997, p. 9 – own translation).

Note 18. At this level, Luhmann locates, for example, organizations that can open the operationally closed function systems to the environment, but one can also extend this to the national segments of the function systems.

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