

## Sociological Systems Theory and World Society

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Keywords: world society, world community, world government, inclusion/exclusion, *Eigenstructures* of world society, functional differentiation

Abstract:

The paper reconstructs the genesis of a sociological theory and especially a systems theory of world society. The first books on world society, which appeared during World War II and immediately afterwards, look at the possibility of world government and its relevance for the solution of global problems. Other authors are interested in the behavioural and normative unification of a world community as infrastructure for the communications of world society. Around 1970, more complex sociological theories arise with a focus on global connectivity and the plurality of global communication systems, such as mass media, the economy, and the polity, as dominant substructures of world society. Among them is the systems theory of Niklas Luhmann that provides a unifying frame focused on the emergence of functional differentiation, the dynamic character of cognitive expectations, and on sociocultural evolution as a process that brings about unplanned innovations in function systems and leads to chains of effects in their social environments. The boundaries of this dynamic complex are the boundaries of the social world that even include unrealized possibilities as world horizon. In more recent decades, other ideas have been introduced on this basis, such as the role of *Eigenstructures* in world society (networks, communities, organizations, world events), the inclusion revolutions as the drivers of functional differentiation, and the global and incessant migration of humanity as historical background for the institutional complexity and unity of human social systems.

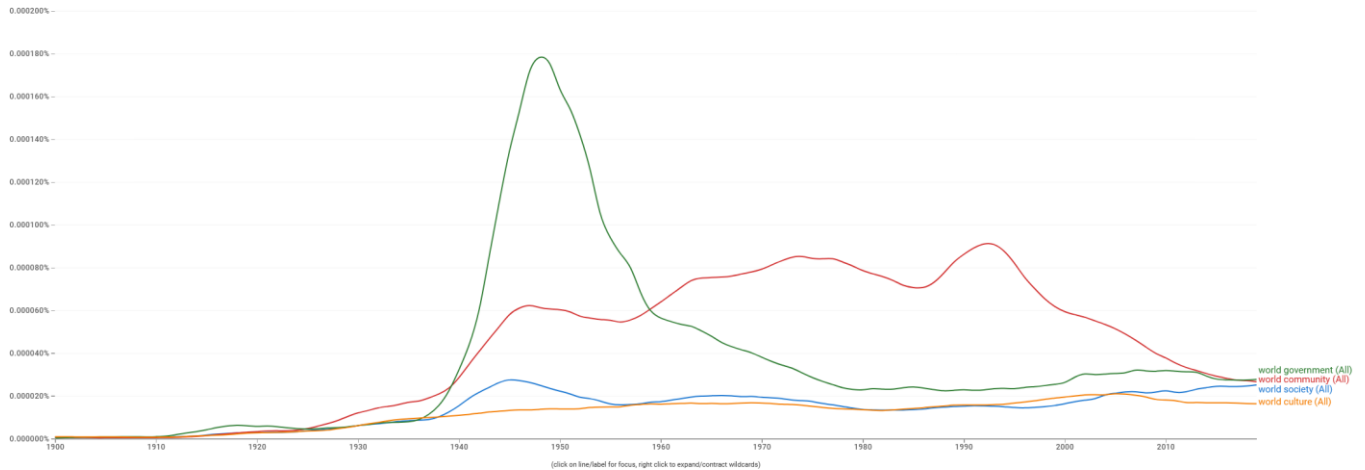
I

Near to the end of the Second World War, the term 'world society' began to be used regularly for the first time. To some extent, most of the early books that discuss World Society are about problems of world order, world conflict, and both the inability of the 'League of Nations' to prevent the outbreak of the Second World War and the hope that a new global organisation, the 'United Nations', might be more successful. But soon there is a sense of despair, a recognition that the United Nations is once again structurally too weak to be an effective peacekeeper, and a search for amendments to the charter of the United Nations.

Two of these early books on world society may be briefly mentioned here. In 1941 *Foundations of Modern World Society* was published by the Australian political scientist Linden A. Mander, who was a professor at the University of Washington in Seattle. The book had a further edition in England in 1945, and two later American prints in 1947 and 1948. In some respects, this book still belongs to the world of the League of Nations – with chapters on mandates and minorities. But it also has other significant features. There are no chapters at all on organisational structures of nation-states. Instead most of this 910-page book is filled with case studies of world problems, such as health, crime, money, labour, trade, conservation of resources, communications and others. It also contains two chapters on international organisation and regional international organisation, which together run to 200 pages. What this structure implies is that work on world problems is done primarily by international organisations. That is a very interesting way of conceiving world society as a post-national condition with international organisations taking responsibility for the governance of world problems.

The other book with some diagnostic value is *The World Community*, edited by Quincy Wright in 1947, which contains a collection of contributions and verbal transcripts from a conference held near Chicago in 1947. The conference looked at the dynamics that connects the rise of ‘world community’, ‘world culture’, ‘world society’ and ‘world government’ as concepts and as institutional realities. Around 1947-8, of these four terms ‘world government’ was by far the most frequently used one (three times as much as ‘world community’ and about ten times as much as ‘world society’) (Google Ngram Viewer). This statistic confirms the prominence of world government as the problem focus of the mid- to late-1940s. However, most of the substantial discussions in the book refer to ‘world community’ with a tendency to understand community as a commonality of behaviours, norms and values. This understanding can be seen as a categorical mistake still repeated today, as it associates ‘world’ with homogeneity instead of diversity. For a reader interested in early interpretations of world society the book is only of limited epistemic value. There are no suggestive or surprising remarks on world society, besides some hints that society is the system based on ‘communications’, whereas community is nearer to ‘interaction’.

Looking at the Google Ngram Viewer for the four core terms over the 70 years between 1947 and 2019 (more recent data are not currently available in Google Ngram), the changes are significant. There is an increase in the frequency of ‘world community’, which becomes the most frequently used term in 1958, and there is a steep decline for ‘world government’ from 1950 onwards. In the years after 2010, the lines for the four terms converge and meet at approximately the same level of frequency.



It is remarkable that ‘society’ is a term that has been discussed and cultivated mainly in sociological systems theory. Talcott Parsons was a participant at the Chicago conference, but his only intervention documented in *The World Community* is at best an indirect contribution to ‘world society theory’. He disagrees with Louis Wirth’s statement that if there is enough common culture in a community there is no significant need for formal law. Parsons points out that the emergence of complex social organisation elicits the need for a complex system of formal law. Where Wirth obviously hopes for common culture as something that obviates the need for formal law, which he perceives as an external form of control and therefore as conflicting with the internal control of cultures he prefers, Parsons speaks of a sociocultural evolution that substitutes law for cultural commonalities and brings about society as a social macro-system of its own. Indirectly, Parsons here identifies a major reason why the contributors to this book have not yet moved towards a concept of society that approaches world society.

Parsons himself took another 14 years to use the concept of world society for the first time, in an introductory chapter of the two-volume collection *Theories of Society*, published in 1961. Here he proposed the idea of a hierarchy of system/subsystem relations. In this hierarchy of social systems, the highest level of a concrete (not analytical) system of interactions is given by society, and this understanding of a plurality of levels of interaction systems includes at this highest level the possibility of an “emergent world society”. Parsons then added another thought. He referred to the possibility of the emergence of world government. While world government would not in itself constitute a “world society”, it would presuppose such a high level of normative integration that one would no longer be able to hold on to the idea of the separateness of “national societies”.

## II

There is a shift in the years after 1950. For almost twenty years, books on world society and the related terms became rare. The Korean War and the Cold War had changed the situation.

In the Ngram data there is a clear dip for all the terms around 'world society' (except 'world community'). In the sixties, Parsons wrote several essays on the international order and the bipolarity of East and West, which he understood as a social system in itself. But he did not interpret this bipolar system as 'world society'.

Then something new happens in the late 1960s and early 1970s. For the first time explicit social scientific theories of world society enter the domain of sociology and the other social sciences. The most relevant authors probably are: the Swiss sociologist and development specialist Peter Heintz, who had worked for many years in Latin America (Heintz, 1982); the Australian diplomat, farmer, and political scientist John W. Burton (Burton, 1972); the American Marxist, sociologist, and Africa specialist Immanuel Wallerstein (Wallerstein, 1974); the Stanford sociologist of education John W. Meyer, who had to travel a long epistemic distance from organizational theorems on 'decoupling' to the idea of 'World Polity' and to the stateless 'World Society' (Meyer, 2010); the legal scholar and sociologist from Groningen Bart Landheer (Landheer, 1966) and the self-taught German sociologist and former public administrator Niklas Luhmann (Luhmann, 1971). Talcott Parsons, although he published until his death in 1979, did not respond to or participate in this movement.

Although the disciplinary and professional backgrounds of these six authors are heterogeneous, there is a remarkable convergence in the theories they propose. Nearly all these theories are concerned with interrelations and interconnectedness, and make use of metaphors from this conceptual field (e.g., cobweb in Burton, fields in Heintz, complexity in Luhmann). Most of these theories use variants of sociological systems theory, which implies that they make use of an abstract concept of systems and of boundaries that separate systems from their environments. The concrete case of spatial-territorial boundaries, characteristic of the political system, is then considered as a special case. Finally, all of these theories (with the partial exception of Wallerstein) postulate a plurality of functionally specified global systems (e.g., the economy, polity, science, mass media), which leads away from the often claimed primacy of the polity (and the economy) in controlling the world. On the basis of these theories, the idea and concept of 'world society' became part of the culture of the social sciences.

### III

Niklas Luhmann is probably the most important of these authors in the 1970s. As soon as he entered sociology as a general theorist (and no longer in the more limited role of a specialist for the sociology of law and public administration), and this was the case around 1970, he was able to present a well-articulated theory of world society. His theory of world society has never been formulated in a prognostic mode, as an anticipation of a future state of society, but always as a description of the contemporary world. This can easily be seen in "Die Weltgesellschaft" (Luhmann, 1971), the first and for a surprisingly long time (more than ten years) only essay he published on the theory of world society.

The main features of his theory, presented in this early essay, remained in place until the last publications of Luhmann in the late 1990s. The essay starts from the old European idea that

the natural equality of all men is the foundation of a world society. Luhmann does not share or accept this assumption. But in many of his writings, and already in this early essay, one gets the impression that there are variants of this idea that he finds convincing; in particular, the concept of humans as 'subjects' whose consciousnesses function as something that constitutes a psychologically diverse but unified world. Individual subjects do not necessarily have the same expectations as other human individuals, but they are, in principle, capable of forming expectations that take into account the expectations that others have formed.

It is this ability to build expectations that take into account other expectations that makes it possible to choose partners for interaction among all humans. This is a second constitutive condition for world society, which is reinforced by the fact that every interaction entails an "and so on" dimension which points to other contacts of interaction partners. In 1971, there was no theory of "small world networks", but this is an argument that can be based on network theory today and that points to a central structural feature of world society.

Expectations exist in two variants: as cognitive expectations, which can be changed when they are disappointed or falsified by ongoing events, or as normative expectations, which are protected against the probability of deviance and are therefore a means of resistance to undesirable outcomes. For Luhmann, religion, law and the polity are systems built on normative expectations, whereas science, the economy and technology are interpreted as systems favouring cognitive expectations. Luhmann postulates a long-term evolutionary trend from normative to cognitive expectations as one implication of world society.

The conceptual pair of differentiation and evolution allows him to outline two further central patterns of the emerging world society. In modernity, differentiation means for the first time in world history a primacy of functional differentiation and therefore the rise of function systems such as the economy, polity, science, art, intimacy, health and others. They are all global systems; they are reciprocally relevant environments for one another. They work on problems that can't be solved by the other highly specific function systems. They can't replace each other. The fact that they need the well-ordered processes of other function systems as a kind of background guarantee is the only form in which one can speak about the integration of world society. It is an integration based on specifications and differences and not on commonalities. In his essay of 1971, Luhmann does not quite succeed in showing why this differentiating dynamics of single function systems necessarily leads to world society. He does not (yet) argue that the specified symbols and operations of all function systems are capable of transgressing traditional social boundaries and only accept the boundaries of the social world (= world society) as boundaries for their operations.

Looking at functional differentiation and the speed of transformations that occur in world society and its function systems, it becomes clear that the autonomy of function systems generates change that is perceived as surprising in other function systems and therefore induces irritations that are enabling conditions for further changes in these other systems. This is sociocultural evolution and in a world that knows no strict limitations for the communication and observation of novelties, sociocultural evolution is clearly a world process. Changes in function systems produce effects in other function systems. Those

sequences of effects in different systems are related but uncoordinated. These uncoordinated effects can have structural effects in world society and its function systems.

Together with the structures of world society evolves its world as a world horizon. The concept of horizon points to the contingency of acts that do not only consist of what they realise but also include a persistent reality of potentialities. This is a thesis that Luhmann adopts from Husserl, who saw the world as a correlate of act(ion)s. Luhmann switches the focus from acts to interactions and to social systems that are built by interactions. World means the horizon of all these interactions/social systems which includes all the contingencies/possibilities produced in the production of interactions.

#### IV

In studying the papers and books of Niklas Luhmann after 1971 one will be surprised how rare publications on world society are. He publishes two papers in 1982 and 1997 (one could add two very short papers from 1994 and 1995). There are subchapters on world society in the two versions of Luhmann's theory of society that have been published in 1997 and 2017 (the latter is based on a manuscript from 1973-5) and there are brief discussions in several of the seven books on function systems, most of which were completed in the 1990s. Perhaps the biggest surprise is that in the two published versions of Luhmann's 'Theory of Society', 'world society' is used as one of a number of special concepts needed to understand society. One might have expected world society to be a much more fundamental concept that in many respects should function as the basis of argumentation in all chapters of the book. In modernity the theory of world society is identical to the theory of society and this is insufficiently expressed in the books Luhmann wrote on *Gesellschaftstheorie*.

Luhmann seems to have thought otherwise. His discussions are dominated by ideas that refer to problems in (general) systems theory and other aspects of his theory of society (evolution, differentiation) and the reader may get the impression that the links that connect these ideas to problems of world society are insufficiently articulated.

In his first 'Gesellschaftstheorie' written in 1973-5 and published posthumously in 2017 as *Systemtheorie der Gesellschaft*, Luhmann has a 47-page chapter on "Orders of magnitude and structures of the system of world society". One important point here is that society is no longer determined or limited by demographic conditions. Instead world society is determined by complexity, i.e. by the number of elements and the selectivity of the relations between these elements. Elements are not identical to the number of humans, since, for example, roles can function as elements and individuals can have few roles or many roles. The distinction of demography and complexity Luhmann proposes is valid and it is meaningful to distinguish demography as an external circumstance from complexity as an internal determinant of society/world society. But he does not really demonstrate that demography no longer matters. And there is a weakness in that Luhmann never looks at empirical and historical data that tell us something about both demography and complexity and their historical relevance as either enabling or limiting conditions for the rise and potential decline of global systems. In reading and discussing this chapter there is one

thought that after a while becomes dominant. Luhmann did not publish this manuscript and it is doubtful whether this text with its enormous amount of conceptual imprecision and lack of empirical foundation, would ever have received his final imprimatur.

In 1982 Luhmann published in *International Journal of General Systems* his second article on world society, "The World Society as a Social System" (Luhmann, 1982). This text was clearly written for a general systems journal, with a strong focus on highly theoretical innovations and a low degree of social science specificity. In terms of world society theory, an important distinction is drawn between a phenomenological world horizon (including the totality of all meanings implied by the world constructions of a *specific society*) and the structural realisation of *one* world society (brought about by the convergence of the world horizons of all societies). In the first understanding, all societies are world societies on the basis of their world horizon and its projective integration of a totality of all entities and events; in the latter understanding, in modernity, for the first time in history, there is only one world society which includes all communications and the horizons of their meanings.

A second important theme in this paper concerns the question of whether society (and by implication world society) can substitute planning for evolution. Luhmann's answer is obviously "no", as any plan has to be introduced into the society and becomes one communication among all the other communications and as such (a general plan becoming a specific communication) has no general steering effect but becomes part of the dynamics constituted by all communications, increasing complexity and intensifying evolution. It is not said explicitly, but the implication is that world society is connected to an increasingly diversifying world process of sociocultural evolution. Biological evolution is also a world process, but it is external to world society and therefore presupposes a bio-physical understanding of 'the world'.

Again, Luhmann takes a long time to publish his third paper on world society: "Globalization or World Society: How to Conceive of Modern Society?" (Luhmann, 1997). It focuses on the concept of society and the argument that society must always be understood in terms of its form or principle of differentiation and a corresponding reconstruction of unity. This principle of differentiation has been stratification or hierarchy in many world regions and for thousands of years. Ideas of unity had a cosmological basis, which only in early modern Europa gave way to secular ideas, among which Luhmann mentions human happiness, cultivation, solidarity (in 19<sup>th</sup> century society) and, finally, similarity of living conditions. The causal relevance of these semantic formulae is not entirely clear, but it is probably most plausible to interpret them as variant inclusion formulae that accompany and advance the transformation to functional differentiation as the new principle of differentiation of society.

Luhmann also distinguishes between internal and external boundaries of society. Internal boundaries are the boundaries between function systems. More than ever before, Luhmann argues that functional differentiation is coterminous with world society. No other boundaries exist on the level of the primary differentiation of society. There are no regional boundaries in world society that separate different forms of functional differentiation from one another. It is the other way round. World society is based on its internal differentiation into function

systems. Internal to function systems regional variants of music or football or democracy and so on exist or arise. Most of these variants are then globalised in their function systems.

The external boundaries of society separate society from its non-social environments. In world society there exist no longer social environments of society as world society incorporates all communications. Two environments of world society can be distinguished: human individuals and all other ecological facts (other life forms and all geo-physical structures of the world). In Luhmann's view, individuality is the only ecological circumstance that is structurally coupled with society and that contributes to the evolution of society. In every human consciousness ideas and plans emerge that can become part of communication and thus can influence the evolution of society.

A final thesis makes use of the distinction between structural coupling and purely ecological conditions. Luhmann has the idea that there is a centrality of inclusion and exclusion as the metacode of modernity that implies that a significant part of humanity suffers from complete neglect and indifference. Human beings are then only bodies, their consciousness is not coupled to world society and they do not enter the structures of functional differentiation via structural couplings. This thesis may be true for extreme events in human history, such as the Holocaust, the Holodomor and the mass starvation in China in 1959-61, but even in these cases the respective exclusions are relativised by the practices of remembering becoming increasingly important in modern society. Luhmann's thesis obviously is not true in the case he most often mentions as his paradigmatic illustration: the Brazilian *favelas*. People who live in favelas do not pay rent and they experience a significant amount of crime and violence as many other humans do. But they are integrated into the structures of functional differentiation: they go to work, their children visit schools, they participate in churches, use the mass media. There are tourism, arts and sports. The *favelas* are therefore integrated into world society.

Luhmann's last statement on world society is found in *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (1997). Once again, Luhmann discusses functional and regional differentiation and argues, with more clarity than before, that two function systems – the polity and the law – are characterized by an internal differentiation into regional subsystems based on territorial delimitations. None of the other function systems has similar regional boundaries, although they all may have regional particularities as a result of structural couplings with the political system and the system of law. These regional structural couplings are often interpreted as an indicator of the dominant position of the political system in functional differentiation. But this is an error. Structural couplings exist between all function systems, and these couplings are always shaped by the form of internal differentiation of the function systems involved. Couplings with the system of science are obviously influenced by the disciplinary structure of science. If you have a pandemic you have to look to biomedical sciences. In the case of climate change, the physical sciences and economics are of particular relevance. The regional structuring of couplings with political systems thus only points to the form of internal differentiation of the polity and does not demonstrate a specific dominance of the polity. Often the opposite is true: the global relevance of political processes is weakened by the regional differentiation of the world polity.



Among those who have contributed to the development of systems theory after Niklas Luhmann, the present author has probably most consistently made world society theory a central theme of his work. It therefore seems appropriate to conclude this article by reconstructing the central themes of my own writings.

In the first place, there is an interest – converging with some of Luhmann’s ideas – in the way that world society is not a macrostructure overarching microevents that do not share the core features of globality (Stichweh, 1995). Such a decoupling of micro-events and macro-structures is entirely implausible. Instead the complexity of world society is implied in every single communication that takes place in the system. First, every communicative event always entails an “and-so-on”, referring to the potential relevance of other contacts of the participants, which could redirect the event towards global connections and entanglements (almost the same argument underlies the “small-world-theory” in network theorising). Second, there is in any meaning communicated in micro-events the implied possibility of connecting the localized meaning to global symbols and semantics and thereby ensuring global relevance. The local meaning has to be decontextualised to generate its influence on global semantics. It can then be respecified at distant places and later times.

With regard to macrostructures, I am trying to strengthen the understanding of the inevitability of the link between functional differentiation and world society. All function systems are based on distinctions and symbols for which regional or other social limitations in principle do not make sense. A functionally differentiated society will therefore necessarily be a world society. These two concepts and their social realisations are connected by a reciprocal intensification. If the universal claims of function systems are accepted, no other boundaries than the boundaries of the social world are possible boundaries for them. Therefore, functional differentiation is an Eigenstructure of world society. ‘Eigenstructure’ is a term taken from mathematics, where it refers to consolidation through repetition of self-referential operations.

A core argument is that functional differentiation is only one of a plurality and diversity of Eigenstructures (Stichweh, 2007), and that the addition of new Eigenstructures is a good indicator of the increasing complexity of world society. Among the Eigenstructures that have become ever more prominent since 1800 are formal organisations, social networks, especially small world networks, epistemic communities (scientific communities, professional communities, epistemic policy communities) and world events (such as the Olympics, world exhibitions and many other events). The list of Eigenstructures is an open list; global interaction systems are another candidate that could be included. What is interesting about the theory of Eigenstructures is that it allows the formulation of extensive research programs for each of these Eigenstructures, and that these research programs can reconstruct significant parts of sociology and sociological theory from the point of view of a theory of world society.

A third point on the research agenda concerns again functional differentiation and the historical path leading to its establishment as the primary form of societal differentiation. It is obvious that small social domains characterised by functionally specified social roles and communications have existed for hundreds of years, in some cases (law, religion, philosophy, political theories) even for two to three thousand years (the hypothesis of the Axial Age first advanced by Karl Jaspers includes the early genesis of these functional specifications). It is still true in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century society that functional specifications are small niches in a stratified society, which as such niches may have a certain relevance for the higher strata but not for the lower. The groups involved may not be much larger than 1% of the (male) population in the countries concerned. Therefore, the decisive step in the movement towards a functionally differentiated world society are “inclusion revolutions” that transform 1% communication niches into global systems that create diversified inclusion roles for 80% or 90% up to 100% of the population (Stichweh, 2024b). The scale and transformative power of this quantitative transformation has not been adequately assessed by Luhmann and other authors in globalisation theory.

The distinction between inclusion and exclusion is the fourth key issue on the research agenda. Luhmann’s version of exclusion theory is outdated and based on empirical errors regarding exclusion zones. Its place must be taken by a theory that distinguishes between inclusion and the multiple variants of ‘including exclusions’ (and ‘excluding inclusions’), such as prisons, hospitals, gangs, ghettos, forms of modern slavery, and many more, that are proliferating in world society (Stichweh, 2024b). This is based on an insight that Luhmann shared in principle with Foucault: in modern society exclusion always takes the form of some kind of inclusion.

Finally, there is the interrelation between sociocultural evolution and the history of human social systems (Stichweh, 2024a). Sociocultural evolution is, from its inception, a one-world process. Taken this into account, one could even say that world society starts with the beginning of human social systems. This argument is supported by the fact that the history of *homo sapiens*’ migrations links all places ever settled by humans into one global network of migration movements and settlements. From this perspective, world society is not a late emergence but an analytical perspective relevant to the entire history of human social systems. Understanding the significance and relevance of this insight is an eminent task for sociology in the coming years.

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