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The Theory of Functional Differentiation and the History of Modern Society. Reflections on the Reception of Systems Theory in Recent Historiography

Zusammenfassung: Anders als andere Elemente von Luhmanns soziologischer Systemtheorie ist seine Theorie funktionaler Differenzierung unter Historikern der modernen Gesellschaft kaum rezipiert worden. Der Aufsatz diskutiert einige Ursachen für diese Situation. Ein wichtiger Grund ist die Persistenz eines älteren, Parson'schen Differenzierungskonzepts mit der Annahme einer stabilen, drei- oder viergliederigen Differenzierungsform. Ein anderer Grund ist die von vielen Sozialhistorikern – insbesondere als Reaktion auf die Welle der Kulturgeschichte seit den 1980er Jahren – vertretene Ansicht, dass die Ökonomie der Kern der modernen Gesellschaft sei, und dass diese deshalb immer noch am besten als eine durch ökonomische Ungleichheit bestimmte Klassengesellschaft zu verstehen ist. Der Aufsatz diskutiert ferner die Anwendung der Differenzierungstheorie von Luhmann in der Sozialgeschichte der Religion. Dort ist sie am Beispiel der katholischen Kirche benutzt worden, um Säkularisierung als einen reversiblen Prozess zu konzeptualisieren, in dem die katholische Kirche mit ihren pastoralen Strategien auf Folgeprobleme funktionaler Differenzierung reagiert.

In the past fifteen years or so, many historians in German-speaking Central Europe have shown an increasing interest in the sociological systems theory of Niklas Luhmann (s. Becker 2004; Buskotte 2006). Luhmann was perhaps a rather unlikely candidate to provide theoretical inspiration for historians, particularly at the juncture of the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the backlash against the ›social science history‹ of the 1970s (best exemplified by Charles Tilly – who is actually a sociologist but has been widely read and acclaimed among historians – in the USA, by Lawrence Stone in the UK and by Jürgen Kocka in the Federal Republic) reached its peak. The widespread discontent with the structural-functionalist paradigm of this approach, with its focus on structures and quantitative methods and its neglect of, if not disrespect for the ›agency‹ and subjectivity of actors in the past, called for other inspirations than a theory such as Luhmann's, who deliberately refused to accept the notions of the ›human‹ (*Mensch*) and the ›subject‹ as systematic categories. Working with and arguing for Luhmann was an uphill struggle for historians during much of the 1990s, when the rejection of the notion of ›society‹ in favour of ›culture‹ had its heyday, and when many historians flocked together under the banner of cultural history and hence rediscovered both older and more recent proponents of an interpretive paradigm such as Nöbert Elias, Max Weber and

Pierre Bourdieu. In the pantheon of cultural history, no plinth is reserved for Luhmann (see the influential texts Daniel 1993; 2001). This is a rather strange situation, since one could argue that the relevance of his theory rests precisely in the fact that it tried to reconcile theoretical key concepts of the sociological tradition – for example differentiation, society or evolution – with genuine insights of the cultural turn, and here in particular the linguistic turn.¹

Thus, it was rather from the margins and an accidental development when the reception of Luhmann's theory gained a foothold among German historians. One important line of inquiry was and still is related to the growing interest in the history of the mass media and the public sphere. The concepts of distribution media and communications media could be employed with success in this field (see Knoch/Morat 2003; Gestrich 2006). In the context of political history, a focus on the mass media and on communication could be combined with an older interest in the idea of 'symbolic politics', and thus led to a reconceptualisation of politics not in terms of power or domination (*Herrschaft*), but rather as an open field in which communicative acts can be used to persuade and to dissuade (see Frevert/Haupt 2005). More likely among historians was also the reception of the paradigm of societal self-descriptions, another core element of Luhmann's theory that employs the distinction between the 'social structure' and the 'semantics' of society (Luhmann 1998). These ideas could be easily connected with the established research programme of a historical semantics of modern society since the *Sattelzeit* (saddle time) from 1750-1850, when the 'Old European' semantics gave way to a new set of concepts which reflected the temporalisation and acceleration which is characteristic for modernity. It is a matter of fact that Luhmann was influenced by the historian Reinhart Koselleck (2002) and his project of a historical semantics when he developed this paradigm. Consequently, historical studies on the changing self-descriptions of modern society often combined ideas borrowed from Koselleck and Luhmann (Nolte 2000).

Whereas the paradigms of communication and self-description have interested an increasing number of historians and have led to worthwhile empirical studies, the balance-sheet is much less positive with regard to the paradigm of functional differentiation. From the architecture of Luhmann's theory it is clear that he understood functional differentiation, in line with many other sociologists from Durkheim and Weber to Parsons and Bourdieu, as a key characteristic of modern society and indeed a benchmark for modernity. Although the relevance of this paradigm should thus be easily acknowledged by historians of modern society even when they do not subscribe to Luhmann's approach

1 The fact that Luhmann's theory of communication is addressing many of the problems which have been put on the agenda by the 'linguistic turn' (and were later followed up by historians – although not through a reception of Luhmann) can be mentioned here only in passing (see Stäheli 2001). For an up-to-date assessment of the reception of the linguistic turn in recent historiography see Reinfandt 2008.

to this issue, his contribution has been – with some notable exceptions, about which more further below – largely ignored in the historical profession. To make things worse, this dimension of sociological systems theory has even attracted scorn, most prominently by the historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler. In a jibe that was apparently directly aiming at Luhmann, he ridiculed the theory of functional differentiation as »historically naïve conceptual acrobatics« (2000, 267). This blunt rejection is even more surprising given the fact that Wehler himself, in his multi-volume history of German society from 1700 to the present, relies on a basic concept of functional differentiation which is apparently modelled along the lines of Parsons' four-tier concept of societal differentiation (Wehler 1987–2003; for a critique see Ziemann 2003) We can take this as a first hint that the apparent difficulties of a reception of this paradigm among historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are perhaps more related to the specifics of Luhmann's contribution to the theory of functional differentiation, rather than to problems with this paradigm per se.

In the following, I will try to account for the marginal reception of this paradigm in recent historiography and for the reluctance of many historians to engage with the specifics of Luhmann's theory of functional differentiation. As its predecessors in this line of theoretical reasoning, this approach is interested in the notion that modern society is not primarily differentiated along the lines of various vertical social strata or classes, but rather along the lines of various systems which are related to specific problems, or, to use a different and somewhat problematic formulation, fulfill a specific function in society. The religion of society is thus concerned with the problem that any meaningful communication transcends the boundaries of immanence, or, in other words, with the distinction between immanence and transcendence. The legal system of society is concerned with the problem to distinguish between legality and illegality, whereas the science system is concerned with the problem to distinguish between true and false results of research, etc. The notion of functional differentiation is rather straightforward, in slightly different terminology familiar to everyone who has encountered Max Weber's concept of different ›value spheres‹ or Pierre Bourdieu's theory of differentiated ›fields‹ in society (Luhmann 1982; Tyrell 1998).

Problems arise, however, in a historical perspective when we start to examine the historical origins of the development towards a functionally differentiated society. It is easy to see that a functionally specified legal, scientific, educational or political system had already developed during the early modern period. At least with regard to the Central European territories under the umbrella of the *Deutscher Bund* since 1815, and later the German Empire since 1871, however, the period since 1800 was marked as one of accelerating pace in the realisation of functional differentiation (Breuilly 2005). The shock of Napoleonic occupation in Prussia and elsewhere, the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire of a German Nation in 1803 and the subsequent secularisation of church territo-

ries and property ushered in a period of intensive political reforms that aimed at a defensive adaption of society to these circumstances. Subsequently, older poly-functional institutions and social configurations were disbanded. One example is the early modern Catholic Church, particularly in the prince-bishoprics, where ecclesiastical, political and economic functions were combined and exercised by the aristocratic prince-bishops and their advisors. The secularisation since 1803 disentangled these overlapping functions and forced the Catholic Church to adopt their bureaucratic structures according to patterns of functional differentiation. A similar development was the dissolution of the artisanal crafts and the merchant's guilds since 1800, and the disbanding of polyfunctional qualities of the aristocracy as an estate that was formerly meant to exercise domination (*Herrschaftsstand*).

All these developments can be described as a modernisation in the sense that older, poly-functional institutions had to give way to an arrangement where functions of political power and sovereignty, cultural functions and economic functions were fulfilled by separate, differentiated institutions (Breuilly 2005). In a theoretical perspective, this process of differentiation can be described as a »decomposition« of complex entities into separate parts. To illustrate this form of differentiation, the biological metaphor of cell division has often been used (Tyrell 1998, 125ff.). Such an understanding of functional differentiation has quite often been applied in historical research. It appears to be a useful heuristic tool to analyse the transition from the early-modern to modern society. Problematic, however, is the conclusion that the decomposition of the older, poly-functional institutions of early-modern society should have led to a stable three-tier or four-tier system of societal differentiation since the beginning of the nineteenth century. And this is at least the logic of Hans-Ulrich Wehler's approach (1987-2003). He conceptualises the economy, social inequality, politics and culture as four distinctive and differentiated fields of German society. Historians tend to argue that such a simplifying and static arrangement is necessary in order to reduce the dizzying complexity of past societies for the purpose of such a comprehensive textbook account. But even if one is tempted to acknowledge the relevance and constraints of presentational issues, the question remains whether this is a viable argument in analytical terms.

From the perspective of Luhmann's theory of differentiation, a static, four-tier concept of societal differentiation tends to omit crucial aspects of the dynamics of modern society. He was thus rather interested in emergent forms of differentiation. Seeing differentiated subsystems of society as emergent phenomena implies that they are not the result of a mere dissection of already established forms to communicate about the world, but rather the result of a contingent process during which a new way to observe the world is cultivated, repeated and ultimately codified in a highly specified manner (Tyrell 1998, 125ff.). The emergence of a differentiated system of sports is perhaps a good example to explain that briefly (see Ziemann 2008).

Members of the European urban elites had practised various team sports, including an early form of football, since the late middle ages simply for leisure purposes and as part of their culture of sociability. In a similar fashion, the gymnastics movement in various countries since the beginning of the nineteenth century exercised the bodies of individuals as a contribution to their respective larger national body politic. Roughly since the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century, however, this began to change. Beginning in England, and rapidly spreading to other European countries, sports was no longer simply a popular pastime. Rather, it increasingly focused on performance and competitiveness as key aspects of organised sports. Hence, leagues and other forms of competitions were organised, league tables established, and in athletics and other sports for individuals time and performance measurement became the most important aspect and benchmark for every sportive activity. In the early 1920s, competitive sports had fully emerged as a differentiated sub-system of modern society, centered around the asymmetrical code of winning/losing. Not sociability, but competitiveness mattered, and consequently also typical side-effects of functional differentiation such as – in this case – the widespread use of doping substances emerged.

Historians struggle to come to grips particularly with one implication of Luhmann's theory of emergent differentiation, his notion of a society without a top or a centre. This is a consequence of his argument that the different system-perspectives (with their respective communicative codes such as immanence/transcendence, winning/losing etc.) have to be seen as an environment for each other, with the implication that no stable set of relations between them exists. To establish the various forms of structural coupling between systems which evolve over time (such as for example the increasing mutual dependency between the political system and the mass media since the 1960s, where the media rely on politics for a constant stream of newsworthy informations, whereas the political system needs the media to increase its visibility (see Bucher 2004)) is a matter of empirical research, but not the result of a preordained logic of intersystem-relations. And the different system perspectives of the media, politics, law, religion, sports etc. remain under any condition distinctive perspectives and are not reducible to each other.

Such a theory of modern society is particularly irritating because it posits the futility of attempts for a political steering or governance of society. In the German intellectual tradition this attempt dates back to G.W.F. Hegel's influential »*Outlines of a Philosophy of Law*« (published in 1818) with its key distinction between bourgeois society and the state. Following Hegel, the state or political system has often been conceptualised as the opposite of or counterpart to society, thus implying that a reform-minded government could successfully endeavour to balance or correct erroneous trends in the economy or other social systems. It hence had a sobering effect on many political scientists and contemporary historians in Germany in the 1970s when Niklas Luhmann intervened in

the ongoing debate about the possibilities to steer mass-unemployment through the welfare-state with the idea that modern society had no centre. Bewildered and largely not convinced, many of them refused to accept the idea that there should be no substantial possibility for governments to master the crisis caused by increasing inflation and rising oil-prices (Geyer 2007, 79).

But it is not only the German intellectual tradition to juxtapose ›state‹ and ›bourgeois society‹ which has blocked further reception of a theory that posits a society without centre or top and without a stable order of differentiated sub-systems. The Parsonian tradition to postulate a fixed set of functional sub-systems is also an obstacle for a proper understanding of the dynamics of emergent differentiation in modern society. Again Hans-Ulrich Wehler's societal history of modern Germany sheds light on the limited fashion in which historians tend to use differentiation theory. As already mentioned, Wehler uses a four-tier model of differentiation. He posits that only empirical historical analysis can reveal the relative significance of the respective subsystems in certain periods, and that the form of their mutual relations can equally only be established by empirical scrutiny. But a close reading both of the rather sparse methodological reflections at the beginning and the summaries of his arguments in subsequent volumes make clear that this is more a smokescreen than an accurate description of the underlying premises of his work (1987, 1-30; 2003, 1294f.). Statements about the non-deterministic nature of the relationship between the four dimensions of society are basically meant to dispel the assumption that such a history of society could revive older Marxist notions of a determination ›in the last instance‹ by the economy. Particularly in the third volume, which is covering Imperial Germany from 1871 to 1918, Wehler makes a strong statement that the reform blockage of the political system was »decisive« for the alleged *Sonderweg* (special path) of German history up till the Nazi seizure of power in 1933. Ultimately, the lopsided Marxist notion of a determination through the economy is replaced with the equally lopsided concept of society as a compact unity or container which is bound together by the political system.

Such an approach is particularly problematic for a societal history of Imperial Germany, a period which saw an intensive dynamic of emergent functional differentiation. Not only did a differentiated sports system with its code of winning/losing emerge. Wilhelmine Germany saw also the final stages of the differentiation of the mass media that was strictly centered around its system-specific code of information/non-information. Especially the dense and competitive scene of tabloid newspapers in Berlin reflected the metropolitan city as a separate, differentiated »word city« (Peter Fritzsche) that pulsated in the ever increasing pace of morning, midday and evening issues plus various special editions. In addition, we shall not forget that the famous ›value judgement controversy‹ that took place in the meetings of the *Verein für Socialpolitik*, an association of liberal-minded economists and sociologists, culminated

in 1913 in the famous call by Max Weber to distinguish between moral value judgements and scientific value relations, indicating a further differentiation between moral values and academic research. Seen in conjunction with other examples of emergent differentiation, it thus seems to be justified to characterise Wilhelmine Germany as an era of polycontextuality, i.e. as a society that was, quite contrary to the assumption of a container held together by politics, characterised by a plurality of divergent perspectives of observation which cannot be subsumed to one of them (Ziemann 2008). Seen in this perspective, the societal history of Wilhelmine Germany proves a conclusion that can be drawn from Luhmann's theory of functional differentiation, i.e. that it disrupts interdependencies between the different subsystems (Tyrell 1998, 127). And this is the ultimate reason why a reform blockage in the political system cannot be attributed as a general problem to the whole society.

Summing up the argument so far, we could say that the reception of Luhmann's approach to the theory of functional differentiation in the historical profession has been hampered by the fact that cultural historians suspected him to be just another version of the Beelzebub of functionalist sociology they had learned to despise, whereas those historians who were interested in a societal history would perceive the notions of emergent, multiple, de-centered and uncoordinated forms of differentiation as a culturalist or – even worse – postmodernist play with words. Ultimately, such a critique would also include Luhmann's sociology into the innuendo often levelled at all proponents of the cultural turn, suggesting the morally charged argument that any approach that stresses the multifarious nature of differentiation and relinquishes the idea of a centre or core of society (usually seen as either politics or the economy) tends to divert attention from the ›real‹ problems and dynamics of modern, contemporary society (see for example Welskopp 1998).

This criticism is related to another reason for the marginal interest in Luhmann's theory of functional differentiation among historians. Many of those who articulate their disappointment with the circumstantial and anecdotal nature of many ›cultural history‹-accounts combine their plea for a renewed societal history with the assertion that they see ›class‹ as a key category for such an endeavour (Eley 2005, 202; Welskopp 1998). The reason for this preference is apparently not only the assumption that patterns of social inequality are more durable and hence have more relevance for the overall structure of a society than for example the arts or religion. More is at stake. Many social historians still hold the assumption that class is not only an important structure of modern societies, but has to be seen as the main form of societal differentiation. Since quantitative data about the persistence of gross inequalities in the distribution of income, wealth and access to higher education is available in abundance from empirical social research for all Western European societies, ›class‹ almost naturally seems to render itself as a pivotal form of societal differentiation. Social historians on the continent – though not necessar-

ily their Anglosaxon colleagues – do usually not take the Marxist tradition of class analysis with its metaphysical and teleological connotations as their point of departure, but rather the more flexible approach developed by Max Weber, with its interest in the empirical description of intra- and intergenerational patterns of social mobility (see Mooser 1984). Even then they might arrive at the conclusion that the Federal Republic has to be seen in the first instance as a »class society« (Wehler 2001). That is, more than 150 years after Marx and Engels famously stated that »the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles«, a bold statement that defies any attempt to further the discussion of functional differentiation among historians.

Finally, I would like to mention briefly the only two – at least to my knowledge – historical monographs which are explicitly centered around Luhmann's theory of functional differentiation. It is perhaps just by chance that they both deal with the Catholic Church, the first one with the Catholic cities of Cologne, Aachen and Münster during the period from 1700-1840, whereas the second is focusing on the ways in which the Catholic Church in the Federal Republic employed various social science methods (statistics, polling, organisations research) during the period from 1945 to 1975 (Schlögl 1995; Ziemann 2007). It is, however, not by chance that both of these studies put the concept of secularisation centre stage, since it has been long established (by Weber, Parsons, Luckmann, and others) that secularisation is best interpreted as a result of functional differentiation. The key point is that religion had to adapt to the fact that the systemic perspectives or codes of the economy, politics, arts and education became independent not only from clerical tutelage, but also developed their own, distinctive rationality criteria (Tschannen 1991).

Luhmann's approach to functional differentiation, however, allowed to conceptualise new insights not only because it reminded the historian to analyse the consequences of differentiation at different levels: at the level of the individual and its personal encounters with other faithful people, at the level of the church as an organisation, and its institutional patterns and membership roles, and finally with regard to religion as a social system, with changing programmes in the use of the code immanence/transcendence. In addition, it was also possible to get away from the notion that the secularisation process is basically a history of religious decline and decreasing relevance of religion in society, which led, as in particular the influential account by Thomas Luckman had argued, to an »invisible religion« (1967). Contrary to this assumption, Luhmann's theory allowed to reconstruct differentiation as a functional specification of the religious system itself, which developed strategies to reformulate the teaching of the gospel and to make it thus compatible with the regime of functional differentiation, or, in other words, to rediscover the *proprium* of religion as for instance in a »healing« pastoral care and inclusion of the »whole« person (see for example Ziemann 2006; for the theoretical point see Tyrell 1996, 447). And only in such a perspective it was possible to revitalise secularisation as a useful tool for the historical analysis

of religion, against the backdrop of its rather mechanical and teleological use in structural-functionalist sociology, but also against the backdrop of a ›culturalist‹ critique which had aimed to scrap the whole concept precisely for these reasons, and because it was deemed to be incompatible with the renewed public interest in religion at the end of the twentieth century.

In this situation, the use of Luhmann's theory of functional differentiation offered at least two distinctive advantages. First, it helped to conceptualise secularisation not as a teleological, irreversible process, but rather as an option, a possible but not necessary reaction of the Catholic Church vis-a-vis functional differentiation. Both the history of Ultramontaniam since the 1830s and the recent, post-Vatican II resurgence of evangelical currents in contemporary Catholicism have to be understood, in this perspective, as positions which deliberately reject to acknowledge functional differentiation and try to raise the profile of the church in outright rejection of this trend of societal evolution and of attempts to accommodate it in the pastoral work of the church. Second, Luhmann's approach allowed to analyse secularisation in terms of the consequences of functional differentiation for the church, its bureaucratic apparatus and its pastoral strategies, for instance with regard to the long-term trend of a shift from the religious function (communication about the openness of meaning) to a secondary performance (addressing the personal problems of individuals through inclusion). Analysed in a systems-theoretical perspective, these shifts demonstrate that secularisation is not simply a history of religious decline, but rather a complex evolutionary process which has effectively led to a transformation of religious communication at the level of interactions, organisations and the religious sub-system as a whole (Schlögl 1995; Ziemann 2007). And only in such a perspective, focusing on functional differentiation, it is still possible to use secularisation theory as a useful heuristic tool in the social history of religion.

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