On the Genesis of World Society: Innovations and Mechanisms

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On the Genesis of World Society: Innovations and Mechanisms[1]

Abstract: *On the Genesis of World Society: Innovations and Mechanisms.*

The essay, first of all, tries to give a very brief historical and explanatory answer to the question: When begins the history of world society? World systems theory (Wallerstein) and systems theory (Luhmann) converge in locating the beginnings of world society in differentiation processes germane to 15th/16th-century Europe. The theory of world society is the theory of the societal system emerging from this conjuncture. The essay, furthermore, adds two argumentative steps. Firstly, it sketches three *structural innovations* which are of especial relevance for the genesis of world society: 1. Functional differentiation; 2. Organizations (especially: multinational enterprises and non-governmental organizations); 3. Communication technologies. There is something to be said for this list of structural innovations being an open one to which other innovations (networks, markets, epistemic communities etc.) may have to be added. Secondly, this argument on structural innovations is supplemented by three *mechanisms* or *processual mechanisms* to which the dynamics of world society is supposed to be due: 1. Global diffusion of institutional patterns; 2. Global interrelatedness; 3. Decentralization in function systems. What is easily to be seen in developing this explanatory apparatus is that there are no convincing arguments for looking at world society as a system characterized by homogenized patterns of social structure and culture.

1 Earlier versions of this paper were published in Rudolf Stichweh, *Die Weltgesellschaft*, Frankfurt 2000, 245-267, and *Distinktion - tidsskrift for samfundsteorie* 1, 2000, pp. 27-38.

I Genesis of World Society

The hypothesis of world society asserts that in the present world there is only one societal system. In this simple formulation one can already find a number of unsolved problems and contested positions. First of all it means that the title *society* can be awarded only once. Germany, the United States, Norway or Pakistan are no longer to be seen as societies. Even Europe is no society. Only the one, world-wide system complies with the conditions for being called a societal system. This demands a certain terminological effort. There seems not to exist a sociologist who on the one hand agrees with the diagnosis of world society and to whom it does not happen now and then that she speaks of a French, Spanish or American Society. But I never heard someone mention the `society of LuxembourgA. This reveals a conceptual problem that was always inherent to the concept of a society closely allied with the territorial state. There was a latent implication of societies having a certain spatial extension. But one could not justify this implication in theoretical terms.

A second problem regards the question if one should continue the concept of society at all. Friedrich Tenbruck and others argued against making any further use of the concept of society.[2] Their reason was that they preferred a semantics more closely tied to classical institutional terms such as state, government and organization/corporation. But there are no plausible arguments for such a self-restriction which only produces a semantic conservatism unable to name and to analyze central phenomena of the social world. In contradistinction to this position this essay prefers the solution proposed by Niklas Luhmann which *defines society via communication and communicative attainability.* That is a proposal of an unmatched simplicity. Under its premises one will conclude that *only world society as the only system being operationally closed on the basis of communications is a possible candidate for being called a societal system*.[3]

[2]Cf. on this Firsching 1998.

[3]Luhmann 1997.

This immediately leads to a third problem or objection towards the theory of world society. Often it is pointed to poverty, inequality and income disparities in the present world as indicators of a lack of global homogeneity. But why should one perceive society as a homogeneous system? Distributional inequalities obviously are internal differentiations of the system of world society. They just raise the interesting question how world society produces and reproduces these inequalities. One should point here to the fact that Immanuel Wallerstein who probably is besides Niklas Luhmann the most influential theorist of world society places the phenomena of the production and reproduction of inequalities into the centre of his conceptual approach.[4]

If one accepts the three problem solutions just proposed - to reject a concept of society bound to the territorial state and its cultural premises, to base the theory of society on a communication theory, to propose an interpretation of world society as a system producing and reproducing inequalities - a fourth question is immediately at hand. When was the starting point of the history of world society?

Three very different answers are to be found in the present literature. The dominant answer which functions more as a presupposition than it is based on research conceives of world society as a system arising just now which means it belongs to the world after World War II or is of even more recent origin. The preference for the term *globalization* is related to this and it accentuates the processual aspects of world society and the provisional nature of the diagnosis. This interpretation - irrespective of its popularity - will founder on the results of historical research which demonstrates among many other examples that the global interrelatedness of the economy in 1900 was not inferior to its global interrelatedness in 1980 (referring to foreign trade and foreign direct investments).[5]

A second representative answer is due to Immanuel Wallerstein. He favours the so-called `long

[4]Wallerstein 1974; 1991.

[5]Cf. Hirst/Thompson 1992 and the very interesting analysis by Williamson 1996.

sixteenth centuryA (1450-1640).[6] Only at this point in history trade between world regions which is a very old phenomenon was complemented by patterns of division of labor between world regions. Wallerstein combines this with the hypothesis that from this structural transformation arose a `world economyA which for the first time in human history was not embraced by a `world empireA following on its heels. In a structural perspective the emergence of `the modern world-systemA then meant a persistent divergence of the boundaries of the economic and the political system.

A third and again radically different answer is to be found in recent neomarxist writings from the André Gunder Frank/Immanuel Wallerstein-tradition. Here one can observe that ever earlier dates for the beginning of world society are proposed. It seems to be the case that an occasional contact between world regions and occasional causal interferences are for some of these writers a sufficient reason to postulate a world system. `The world system. 500 years or 5000?A[7] is the characteristic title of a book from this discussion published some years ago. What is probably wrong with this interpretation is that it confounds the ecological interaction between societies - i.e. societies becoming a relevant environment for other societies - with processes of structure formation in one and the same societal system.

Which answer is given by sociological systems theory to this question of the beginnings of world society? First of all, systems theory will concede that for thousands of years there existed several societal systems simultaneously. As most of these societal systems were tribal societies one can even speak of thousands of simultaneous societal systems. Even in the seventeenth century, it makes no sense to conceive of Europe and China as different parts of only one society. Of course, there were occasional communications which were produced in one of these two systems and were understood or - more probably - misunderstood in the other one. But these occasional communications did not have extensive societal ramifications in the other system, and therefore they did not change the basic fact that these societal systems were nearly always operationally closed towards one another. On the other hand,

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[6]Wallerstein 1974, Ch. 2.

[7]Frank/Gills 1993.

one would be able to demonstrate in the case of China that in the same period the signs of a transformation soon to arrive were to be observed. For the Jesuit order, for example, one of the early global actors, places in China and places in Europe were already in the seventeenth century places on a global map on which no completely different societal systems were inscribed. Only such a world construction enabled the flexible worldwide assignment of personnel which characterized the Jesuit order. This story could be a very interesting case study on the topic of the strategic importance of organizations for the realization of world society.

Before giving a more precise answer to this question for the beginnings of world society one more point important for systems theory should be emphasized. As long as there are several or even many societal systems in the world this implies that one can not speak of `world society@ in structural terms. But, each of these different societies constitutes a *world of its own* which is a complete or total world for the respective society. These societies include whatever happens to exist in the world in their world view or world interpretation. They extend this inclusive interpretation to other societies if they know or believe to know anything about foreign societies. It is significant that often communicative competencies are denied to members of other societies. One calls them *barbarians* or invents other names for them which imply that these members are no human beings and are not able to speak human languages.[8] From a phenomenological point of view - i.e. in terms referring to the worldview societies conceive - nearly all human societies seem to be world societies which implies that they do not accept other autonomous societies of equal dignity beside them. It is an interesting empirical question how often in the history of the world there existed societies which were able to imagine and to accept that there are other societal systems beside their own and which were even willing to describe the interrelations between societies as symmetrical.

From this argument one may conclude that from the beginnings of humanity until the early modern world (16th to 18th centuries) there always existed in terms of social structure many societies. Each of these

[8]Cf. for China and Greece Bauer 1980; Hartog 1991.

societies realized from a phenomenological point of view a world view which qualifies it with respect to its self-description as a world society.[9] The singularity of the modern world society then consists in structural reality on the one hand and phenomenological worldview and self-description on the other hand converging. Now it happens to be true for the first time in history that one societal system which in its world construction includes any event in the world into its purview *really is the only societal system on earth.*

When begins the history of this world society? Is there any meaningful answer to this question? The answer of Immanuel Wallerstein was: The modern world-system begins in the sixteenth century when trade is no longer caused by accidental differences in natural resources and local production but induces a division of labor between trading regions. That is trade causes structural changes in the societies involved.[10] This answer is not wrong. But one should not accept the reduction on economic exchange. Therefore the proposal has to be rephrased to allow a more general picture. It then says: World society begins when one of the societal systems of the world no longer accepts that it is only one among many societal systems in the world. Furthermore this societal system has to control the necessary instruments and resources to transform this nonacceptance of difference into structural reality. This happens only once in human history: In the process of expansion of European-Atlantic society beginning in the 15th/16th centuries. This expansionary process incorporated via colonialism and other ways of reaching out the whole of the remaining world into the respective societal system. As a result of this process there is no economic action, no educational activity, no religion and no knowledge system which could be isolated from the effects of this world-system.

The thesis of a specific expansionary potential of the European-Atlantic society rests on premises regarding the control of natural resources, the availability of techniques (for the control of resources and

[9]Cf. Stichweh 2000a.

[10]Wallerstein loc. cit.

for military purposes)[11] and cultural values. It is important to point to this, although no extensive analysis can be undertaken here. An interesting proposal regarding cultural values has been made by Talcott Parsons some time ago. He ascribed to the European-Atlantic society a value pattern he called instrumental activism.[12] This is a pattern consisting from two main components: *instrumental* means a general attitude towards social and material components of the world which are conceived as being there for the self-realization of society and its individuals - *activism* means an institutionalized value somehow binding for each individual to participate in this process of self-realization of society. If this diagnosis should be realistic it could contribute something to the explanation of the singularity of the modern world society.[13]

II Innovations

The theory of world society is the theory of this modern system arising since the 15th/16th centuries and it is based among others on writing its history. In the following this paper will concentrate on two other aspects which are central to the theory of world society. First of all it will identify some *innovations* which are of especial import for *structure formation* in world society (pt. II). Then in the third part the argument will focus on *processes/mechanisms* which are deemed to be causally relevant for the *dynamics* of world society.

1. *Functional differentiation*: One can agree with Wallerstein that the history of the world system begins when from relations of trade - i.e. occasional contacts between separate systems - arises a division of labor, that is a process of structural differentiation in *one* emerging system. But in this case,

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[11]Cf. on this Diamond 1997.

[12]See for representative statements Parsons/Platt 1973, 40-45; Parsons 1973.

[13]Cf. Stichweh 1991, Ch. VII, `Das Wertsystem frühmoderner europäischer GesellschaftA.

too, one needs a more general argument. It seems to be characteristic for the emergence of world society that this happens as soon as communicative interrelations between up to now separate societies become an effective causal factor in the processes of differentiation of function systems which are definitely global systems, i.e. their communicative reach is not restricted to one of the former societal systems.

It is possible to observe one example of such a process by looking at the *differentiation of science* from the 16th to the 18th century. This is a process which is very much pushed by the need to integrate ever new pieces of knowledge arriving from the different regions of the world.[14] Another example in 19th and 20th century society is the *differentiation of modern art* advanced by the increasing diversity of artistic artefacts from different regions of the world becoming known and being presented in exhibitions since the end of the nineteenth century. One can probably construct an analogous argument for each of the function systems in modern society. The conclusion from this reflection is: Functional differentiation establishes itself as the primary mode of internal differentiation of world society. In each case arises via differentiation a function system which is in its core a system of communications which is as well global in its reach as highly specific in its communicative operations.

2. *Organizations*: The example of the Jesuits in China which was cited above already illustrated in an anecdotal form the causal relevance of organizations in the genesis of world society. It was already true for the corporations of late medieval and early modern Europe - one may point to universities, ecclesiastical orders, cities and corporations of strangers such as trade companies or student nations - that they were foreign bodies in the society of estates which still characterized European society. But as such bodies foreign to the main structures of European society they were of considerable innovatory import: they incorporated the new principle of specialization on functionally defined types of action and communication.[15] A somehow analogous situation arose in 19th and 20th century society with regard to

[14]Cf. Stichweh 1984, esp. Ch. 1.

[15]Cf. Stichweh 1991, II.

free associations and formal organizations.[16] In all these cases we have to do with *membership organizations* to which considerable globalization effects can be attributed. They have some properties responsible for this: the comparatively unrestricted mobility of personnel internal to these organizations; the structural ability to establish branches and dependencies at many places in the world; the easy flow of communications in organizations; the comparative ease of knowledge transfers internal to organizations. Regarding the globalization effects which result from these structural possibilities one will then have to examine if they remain purely internal to the organization or somehow transform the societal environment of organizations. These brief remarks already point to the assumption that a theory of world society always has to include a theory of the career of formal organizations; since formal organizations are one of those innovatory structures, arising since medieval Europe, which enable the dynamics of world society.[17]

There are especially two new types of organizations which are responsible for realizing world society and for the global interconnectedness which as a matter of course includes third world countries. The first of these two organizational types are the multinational enterprises of the economy of which it may be said that they are much more than foreign trade and international capital transfers - and beside the structural transformation of financial markets - the really driving force in the globalization of the economy. If this hypothesis is true it would support the proposal that the globalization of the economy is in its core a knowledge process. The multinational enterprise in managing its global expansion depends primarily on knowledge and technology transfers internal to the organization. It may even be said that this ability to internalize knowledge transfers is the *raison d>être* of the multinational enterprise.[18]

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[16]Cf. on `free associationA as principle in modern society Parsons 1971; Stichweh 2000b.

[17]Cf. as an influential and problematical example Coleman 1990, pt. IV, who bases his theory of modern society nearly exclusively on the distinction of corporate actors (i.e. formal organizations) and natural persons.

[18]Cf. Stichweh 1999.

The second conspicuous and new organizational type is the so-called non-governmental organization (NGO or INGO). This too is a remarkable invention: an interest-based organization which in its organizational reach is no longer limited by territorial borders. The spectrum of social and political problems such INGOs specialize on is extremely diverse: the care for political prisoners; organizations of medical doctors operating in war regions; organizations for research and politics referring to anthropogenic climate change, activists who are involved with AIDS and its medical treatment and many others. Especially in world regions with weak state organizations to which many third world countries belong the influence and penetration of these two types of organizations is striking. The rapid growth in the number of multinational enterprises is well known. But the same is true for INGOs. Even in 1992 a researcher counted a number of 23 000 INGOs.[19]

3. *Communication technologies*: A third central component of world society are communication technologies. This hypothesis nearly suggests itself if one defines society via the concept of communication. And one can invert this argument and use the incontestable relevance of communication technologies in the development of modern society as an empirical support for a theory of society based on communication theory. The invention of printing was in Europe simultaneous with the beginning of the expansion of the European-Atlantic system of society. After the invention of printing there was for four centuries no other invention of a comparable import in the domain of communication technologies. One may interpret this as evidence for a rather slow take-off of the system of world society. In these four centuries between 1500 and 1900 the acceleration of communication, the penetration of space by networks of communication was wholly dependent on the development of the technologies of transport which was a very slow-going process again. Communications were transferred via the same technologies that were used for the transport of men, and in these technologies of transport there were no major innovations until the 19th and 20th centuries. The invention of telegraphy in the 19th century and the rapid sequence of new technologies of telecommunication - from the telephone to the computer - then meant a radical shift in the technological infrastructure of human communication. A point which

[19]Ghils 1992, on 419.

has been emphasized by Hermann Lübbe is the decoupling of telecommunications on the one hand and the technologies of transport on the other hand.[20] The diffusion of communications is then no longer dependent on making use of those technologies of transport and those roads which were created for transporting men and goods. This decoupling of communications from transport produces the *destruction of space* which has been emphasized by historians such as John Albion[21] and sociologists such as Anthony Giddens.[22] It is then no longer the case that considerable spatial distances are necessarily correlated with a loss of simultaneity. Distance becomes compatible with the global simultaneity of events.

III Mechanisms

Until now this discussion was focussed on three *institution*al *inventions* which are of importance for the genesis of world society - *function systems, organizations, telecommunication*. Whoever wants to write a history and theory of world society will have to write the history and theory of these three inventions, too. But this does not yet result in a sufficiently complete picture of world society. Therefore this essay is going to propose that we need some more assumptions to be able to understand the dynamics of the genesis of world society. These additional assumptions refer to something one might call *mechanisms or processes of world society.* Three such mechanisms will be discussed in the following.

The first of these mechanisms will be called *global diffusion* or *global diffusion of institutional patterns*. Its precondition is the frequency and intensity of reciprocal observations in the system of modern society. If one looks at the level of individuals, of organizations or other social systems it always seems to be true that the relevant units observe one another with increasing frequency and intensity. This

[20]Lübbe 1996.

[21]See John 1994.

[22]Giddens 1990.

is supported by new technological possibilities for the spread of communications. Observations take place on the level of attribution und self-attribution to social categories: States observe States; central banks observe other central banks; fundamentalist sects observe other fundamentalist sects, and finally individuals observe other human beings who submit the same claim to individuality. In sociological network theories there is today often postulated a so-called *anticategorical imperative*, and by this imperative is meant that the belonging to social categories is no longer a sociological variable of explanatory power.[23] But there seems to be one fault in this hypothesis. It fails to notice the level of social self-observations on which identifications with social categories obviously arise and on which social comparison processes are then generated.[24] It is this mechanism which makes a rapid diffusion of novelties in the system of world society probable: States imitate the welfare programs, the structures of the educational system, and many other institutional features from other states; and perhaps they do this only to be accepted as complete states in their own right. Individuals copy patterns of individuality. One may perceive an inherent contradiction in this last illustration. How could one obtain individuality by copying it from elsewhere? But, if the structure of social expectations demands uniqueness or singularity from individuals and if individuals do not succeed to find this singularity by introspection, there is nothing left to them than the recourse on a social stock of patterns for individuality.

This mechanism of global diffusion of institutional patterns has primarily been theorized in American neoinstitutional sociology.[25] It allows explaining processes of homogenization in the system of world society. In doing this it does not necessarily predict a worldwide assimilation to only one institutional standard. In processes of institutional borrowing there will always arise the need to differ in some respects from other systems. But even for this need for difference formation in worldwide processes of copying institutional patterns, there again exists only a small sample of patterns all of which are global patterns in their turn. Insofar the theory of world society will not predict global standardization, but it will

[23]Cf. Wellman/Berkowitz 1988; Emirbayer/Goodwin 1994.

[24]Cf. on this Strang/Meyer 1993.

[25]Cf. as an overview Powell/DiMaggio 1991; Brinton/Nee 1998.

predict limitations which are given by a repertoire of institutional possibilities which is a global repertoire in itself.

The predictive power of this thesis of relative global homogenization is of course limited by the reach of the associated theoretical model: global diffusion of institutional patterns. That is a restriction which in many arguments is not sufficiently taken into consideration from which result problematical ideas about a logic of world society thought to be universal. A second relevant question is: How much interaction and reciprocal observation is necessary for this mechanism to function effectively? Probably not very much. As soon as certain cultural premises are institutionalized worldwide - e.g. a positive valuation for modernity - affiliated institutional models can diffuse without much effort as long as they are supposed to be prototypical for modernity.

It is now necessary to introduce the second mechanism hypothesized to be helpful for a description and explanation of the dynamics of the system of world society. One could call this mechanism *global interrelatedness*. Its theoretical background is broader than is the case for the mechanism of global diffusion. Whereas this last one has its theoretical mainstay in sociological neoinstitutionalism, regarding the mechanism of global interrelatedness one can look to developments in network theory, systems theory and even to the globalization theory of Anthony Giddens. In the case of global diffusion we have to do with relations of mutual observation and comparison between social units which may be separated from one another by considerable spatial distances. There is no need of direct contact between the units. To say it in a physical metaphor: we have to do with a theory which looks for *distance effects.*

It is wholly different in the case of global interrelatedness.[26] The analytical interest is first of all focussed on the individual communicative act or - in the language of network theory - on the individual network-tie in its embeddedness in other network ties. The interrelation of globality and locality is then locally realized in the individual communicative event or in the individual somewhat stable interrelation between

[26]Cf. on the following Stichweh 1995; 1996.

two network-knots. Globality is produced by the interrelations of communicative events. Taking up once more the physical metaphor just introduced one may speak of a theory interested in *short distance effects*, a theory which postulates a transmission of globally relevant effects, a transmission which always operates locally.

One can explicate this short distance theory by means of *two hypotheses*. Both of these hypotheses may be related to systems theory and to network theory as two sociological paradigms which show some conceptual similarities in the respects interesting here. The first hypothesis will be called the *and-so-on-hypothesis*. By this designation is meant that for the theory of world society it is not decisive that the individual interaction spans enormous spatial and temporal distances. The decisive point is neither that there is a rapidly increasing number of intercontinental telephone talks or of intercontinental travellers. It is nonetheless easy to show that in these respects the growth rates are remarkable.[27] But the argument here is interested in another and probably more fundamental point. It says that in any individual interaction there is the presence of an *and-so-on* of other social contacts of the participants. Only this establishes the possibility of worldwide connectedness, a possibility which then becomes relevant in the individual interaction as a kind of knowledge of selectivity. As such knowledge of selectivity it intervenes in the individual interaction and changes its style. In network theory one finds a related hypothesis which is known as "small world-hypothesis".[28] What is meant by this is a phenomenon well known to most participants in society. One happens to meet a person who is a complete stranger at first, and then one realizes that this person is the friend of a friend, or an acquaintance of an acquaintance. First of all surprises arise on this basis, and to the mere interest in such surprising effects one may then add a well-established sociometric research technique which looks for acquaintances of acquaintances of acquaintances. In doing research of this type one will soon find out that after a small number of steps there are already millions of persons who are related by so-called indirect ties. One of the most important points in theorizing upon `small worldsA is that they can only

[27]See Inkeles 1975.

[28]See Kochen 1989 and see now very interesting Watts 1999.

exist if *connectedness in a network is independent from an external length scale.*[29] A small world may not be restricted by physical space, and exactly this characteristic - the annihilation of physical space - is ascribed to world society by numerous theoreticians.

On the other hand one might object that the sociological relevance of these sociometric techniques is not evident. If one takes such a research approach, after a short time most ties one finds are indirect ties - someone is the friend of a friend but one has never before seen him or talked to him or her. Such indirect ties become nearly never active ties. If one would try to activate them one would often meet a somehow baffled interaction partner who doubts the legitimacy of the unexpected approach. Therefore one should have to expect many negative reactions. But to this objection may be said that it only points to the fact that global interconnectedness is no interactional phenomenon and can not be transformed into such an interactional reality. *A small world may function as the effective infrastructure of global interconnectedness, just because it could never be established as a global interaction system*.[30]

What this discussion points to is that the *and-so-on-hypothesis* as well as the *small-world-phenomenon* need a further hypothesis which formulates some conditions specific to modern society. This hypothesis will here be called *decontextualization-thesis*. What is meant by this is the postulate that the extension of the *and-so-on*-chains can only be managed by interactionally relevant abstractions which decouple the interaction from diffuse local relevancies. What kind of abstraction is suitable here? First of all one should think of functional specification, that is of the background experience that in present-day society the communications one is participating in are located in a specific function system most of the time. This allows ignoring many other functional relevancies although they are enmeshed with the communications in a local context. The relevance of functional abstractions is supplemented by the

[29]See Watts 1999; 1999a.

[30]To the understanding of *interaction systems* (reciprocal response presence) presupposed here see Goffman 1983; Luhmann 1975.

generalized symbols of communication media - such as money, truth, power etc. - which strengthen the background experience of communicating in a specific function system by the operative presence of binary codes.

Many other phenomena add to this. In Anthony Giddens' writings the term for *decontextualization* is *disembedding*.[31] The examples for disembedding Giddens mentions are *expert systems, trust, professions* and finally *symbolic tokens*. *Symbolic tokens* is his term for the generalized symbols of communication media such as money and for analogous phenomena. Once more we have to do with a generalization of symbols made possible by functional specification.

Is there in network theory an analogue to *decontextualization*? The network concept itself can take this position. *Network* obviously is a decontextualization-term. The concept of *network* takes the position of older sociological concepts for middle range phenomena such as *group* and *community*. The reason for this is that the network concept takes account of the fact that relevant social contacts which occasion repeated communicative exchanges among participants are decoupled from spatial contiguity and interactional copresence. This is well illustrated in empirical studies by Barry Wellman on forms of community in East Yorkers, East York being a fictive name for a certain city region in Toronto.[32] Wellman demonstrates that on the first approach nearly all classical indicators for urban community are absent in East York: the streets are empty; one does not change over to the neighbor; public spaces are either inexistent or deserted. But if one tries to reconstruct *community* on the basis of network-ties, one observes a well-functioning pattern of symmetrical and asymmetrical exchange among participants of the network who are repeatedly in contact among one another. These stable exchange relations furthermore present a kind of functional differentiation of types of ties. From such research results the question if the *network phenomenon* (which has to be distinguished from the *network concept*) should be added to the list of structural innovations characteristic of world society. The

[31]Giddens 1990, 21-29.

[32]Wellman/Carrington/Hall 1988; Wellman 1992.

concept of network would then not only point to a universalistic method and theory in the discipline of sociology, it would furthermore indicate a new type of *structure formation* in the system of world society. Networks displace older types of structure formation such as *group* and *community*; they are defined by certain quantitative limitations on the number of ties, and furthermore by them not being limited by physical space. An indicator for the validity of this argument is the current prominence of the network concept not only as a *scientific concept* but as a prominent term in the self-description of contemporary society.[33]

The argument up to here probably demonstrated that a different picture results when one looks for *patterns of global interrelatedness* instead of *patterns of global diffusion*. On the one hand there is a unified structure even in interrelatedness enforced by the abstractions germane to the function systems. On the other hand if global social effects progress - as it is the case in interrelatedness - from event to event, from communication to communication, from tie to tie, surprises and discontinuities in these chains of effects are to be expected. Therefore no homogenization effects are predicted by the mechanism global interrelatedness, in contradistinction to the global diffusion mechanism which predicts a limited set of successful models.

There is finally - and this is the last point in this paper - a third mechanism in the genesis of world society. This paper proposes for this mechanism the name *decentralization in function systems.* Once more the differentiation of global function systems is seen as a core phenomenon, and I then postulate a process which is internal to these function systems. Again a classical concept of sociological theory is involved. In this case it is the centre/periphery-distinction.[34] Whenever one speaks of centres and

[33]A good case study is offered by the present *Microsoft* antitrust case in which for the first time in American jurisdictional history the jurisdictional theory of *network effects* was applied in the findings of the judge. By *network effects* is meant that a monopoly results from numerous buyers already having adopted a certain product and then other buyers being forced to do the same because of their network interrelatedness with the first class of buyers.

[34]See Shils 1961.

peripheries one speaks of differences in relevant resources. These differences are the basis of the formation of a social system. And they structure processes of interaction in such a centre/periphery-system. As is well known Immanuel Wallerstein conceived his world system theory on the basis of this distinction of centres and peripheries.[35]

As Wallerstein was always primarily interested in the historical reconstruction of world society, his preference for the centre/periphery-distinction seems to be somehow adequate. One can propose that centre/periphery is a globalization concept of the premodern world. It allows a convenient description of societies in which global interaction was still a rare phenomenon and in which big inequalities seemed to be necessary to motivate global interactions. Among circumstances of this type one needs big inequalities of power, wisdom, in religious states of grace and in economic resources as structural premise for individual events of global interaction. The hypothesis here proposed says that centre/periphery-distinctions and the implied differences in the control of resources are important for the beginnings of world society because they motivate what is still improbable in the beginning: to take the risks of global interaction and to accept the effort of bridging great distances.

From this it follows that the further history of world society is characterized by the erosion of those centres characterizing the start. This erosion of centres first of all happens in the function systems that is in those systems which constitute the primary differentiation of world society. But why should this be the case? The hypothesis here proposed is that the interaction of this third mechanism with the other two mechanisms analyzed above makes the demise of centres probable. Both of these other two mechanisms - global diffusion and global interrelatedness - operate principally lateral or horizontal. Even when they had in their beginnings privileged points - models which are copied much more often or central positions in networks - these privileged points are abolished by the success of imitation processes or by the growth of networks. Both mechanisms obviously dissolve in their day-to-day operation the premises of centre formation which stood at the beginnings of world society. After this

[35]Wallerstein 1974; 1991.

process of decentralization in function systems has operated for some time the probability of homogeneity in world society diminishes again. In decentralized function systems variation can happen anywhere and can no longer be controlled by centres. Variation can progress via networks and it can be renormalized via global imitation. But in no way this will lead back to homogeneity.

IV Résumé

The argument of this paper has tried to establish in a first approximation the basic elements of a theory of world society. In a brief enumeration one may distinguish three such elements: *events*, *structures*, and *processes*.

1. One obviously needs a sufficiently precise and detailed *history of world society* for being able to theorize on this system. Which are the starting points and irreversible transition points in the history of world society? In historicizing the concept of world society one takes any futuristic aspect from the concept of world society and makes it possible to test whichever hypothesis one has against a wealth of historical evidence instead of always having to point to probable future events. There are globalization processes in all of human history; in certain respects one can describe every human society as a world society; and finally there is a long prehistory and history of the modern world society of our times. That is an abundance of historical and comparative information is available. But pointing to this historical background does not at all negate the singularity of the present world society but is more to be seen as a technique to enable us to see this singularity in sharper relief.

2. What has been described in the second part of this paper as (structural) innovations arising in the genesis of world society can also be described as *structures germane to world society*. In my opinion this conceptual search for new ways of structure formation has to be a core component in any research on world society. Structures such as *function systems*, *organizations* and *networks* to which a brief exposition was given in this paper are not entirely new to the modern condition. But they belong to that

class of structures which are related to world society by relations of *reciprocal intensification*. World society rests on their *modus operandi,* and on the other hand the same world system functions as a macro environment which privileges these structures in contradistinction to more traditional ones. Research on these structures and the search for other comparable innovations (e.g. *global interaction systems*) which allow prolonging this list will be decisive for any theory of world society.

3. Looking for *processes* in the system of world society is closely related to the distinction of *globality/locality*, probably the most prominent distinction in theorizing on world society. Regarding this distinction of globality and locality one argument should be tried again which Niklas Luhmann insistently made referring to *autonomy/dependence* as the core distinction of sociological differentiation theory.[36] In differentiation theory it is not either *autonomy* or *dependence* of differentiated parts but both sides of the distinction are intensified. Differentiated systems combine more autonomy with more dependencies from a plurality of other systems. An analogous logic holds in the case of the distinction globality/locality. In global systems in which an increasing number of global interconnections is to be observed there is at the same time an intensified articulation of local specificities. This was already pointed to in Georg Simmels `Über sociale DifferenzierungA from 1890 when Simmel argued that the `*universalizationA* (`VerallgemeinerungA) of the medieval world (advanced among others by the claims of the German empire for `universal sovereigntyA[37]) became the decisive stimulus of the particularism being observable ever since among European peoples.[38] Studying in this way different dynamics of articulating globality and locality one is dependant on the *processes of globalization* or *mechanisms of globalization* we discussed in our third part. Therefore the study of processes of globalization forms the third task for any research undertaking aiming towards a theory of world society.

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[36]Luhmann 1982.

[37]Cf. on `universal sovereigntyA Dumont 1985; reprinted as chapter 2 in Dumont 1991.

[38]Simmel 1890.

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