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Stephan Stetter is Lecturer in Political Science and International Relations at Bielefeld University, Germany.
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Modern systems theory, international relations and conflict studies
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Series editor’s preface

This is the second book in this series that draws specifically on the work of the German social theorist Niklas Luhmann. Although still an unfamiliar name in the largely Anglophone world of international relations theory, there are a growing number of scholars in Europe who are focusing on Luhmann’s work and are endeavouring to demonstrate the relevance of his ideas for the study of international relations. From one perspective this is not a difficult task because Luhmann argues that the only way to develop social theory is to start from the assumption that we all operate within a world society. Unlike most traditional social theorists, therefore, Luhmann takes it for granted that it is essential when developing social theory to start from a global perspective. Moreover, he also presupposes that the emergence of world society is not a recent phenomenon but can be extended back for five hundred years to the point when contact was established between the eastern and western hemispheres.

When Luhmann refers to world society, however, he does not mean an amalgam of the established but increasingly interdependent societies that exist across the globe. On the contrary, he wishes to break free from the traditional sociological assumption that society is a territorially bounded unit that is held together by common rules and values. To the extent that social theory has impinged on the study of international relations, it is this traditional notion of society that has invariably been called upon. English school theorists, for example, are interested in the way that states are constrained by the existence of common rules and values within international society and they are also increasingly conscious of common rules and values that impinge on individuals within an emerging world society. The problem with these ideas, from Luhmann’s perspective is that they are not pulled together by an overarching social theory. But an even bigger problem with the English school approach is the way that the anomic features of international relations are relegated to an international system. Such a concept is deeply problematic for Luhmann because, as he sees it, there are no features that are external to world society and that, as a consequence, have to be accounted for outside of social theory.

Although Luhmann’s emphasis on world society obviously seems to provide a point of contact with international relations theory, the task of building bridges is not straightforward. For most mainstream thinkers in international relations, Luhmann’s social theory is essentially alien to their fundamental approach to the subject because they assume that international actors provide the main point of reference. So an international system is identified in terms of the relations that form between states or, increasingly, non-state actors. But this is not how Luhmann thinks about world society. His focus is not on the common rules and values that bind actors together. For Luhmann, world society is constituted by a wide array of functionally differentiated systems that include not just politics and economics, but science, health, law, education, etcetera. However, the focus is not on politicians, lawyers or teachers but on the way that political, legal and
educational communication ensures that these systems are reproduced. They are, in other words, autopoeitic or self-reproducing systems that operate on the basis of their own distinctive structural logic.

For anyone who is not versed in Luhmann’s thinking, however, it is by no means obvious what implications flow from this theoretical position. One of the substantial benefits of this book, therefore, is its focus on territorial conflicts, an issue that is of central importance for an international relations audience. By taking a familiar issue, it becomes much easier to assess the strengths and weaknesses of Luhmann’s approach from an international relations perspective. One of the obvious strengths is that the approach does not view conflict as an abnormal feature of world society, on the one hand, or assume that common values are needed to prevent conflict, on the other. But an equally obvious weakness of Luhmann’s approach is that, in practice, the role of conflict has been consistently underplayed. The book, therefore, opens up a two-way street, that reveals the utility of Luhmann’s thinking for understanding a recurrent problem in international relations while at the same time highlighting an important area of investigation for Luhmannian thinkers.

Richard Little
University of Bristol
Preface

The Institute for World Society Studies at the University of Bielefeld, which I joined in November 2002, offered invaluable support in the preparation of this book. Not only is it a stimulating intellectual ‘localization’ for the study of globalization processes and politics in world society, but also offers a unique environment for pursuing interdisciplinary research on International Relations (IR), conflict studies and modern systems theory. In that context—and inspired by the Luhmannian spirit still present in the corridors of Bielefeld University—the idea was born to convene a workshop on IR, territorial conflicts, and modern systems theory. The objective was to discuss in detail how the study of conflicts in IR could profit (or not) from systems theoretical insights—and how modern systems theory could profit (or not) from an intensified dialogue with the way conflicts are studied in IR. Most chapters in this book are revised versions of the original workshop papers.

I am grateful indeed that my idea to organize an international workshop on ‘Contradiction! Territorial Conflicts in World Society’ in December 2003 was strongly supported by the Institute for World Society Studies, which offered generous organizational and financial support without which the organization of this workshop would not have been possible. I would like to thank in particular Mathias Albert, Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka and Rudolf Stichweh, the then-directors of the Institute for World Society Studies, for their ardent support of this workshop. I would like to thank in particular Martyna Puls, my student assistant, for her enthusiastic and professional contribution to the organization of the workshop. I would like to express my gratitude to Thomas Diez, Joachim Wöll and Oliver P.Richmond, who were discussants at the workshop and provided crucial input for the revised versions of the individual workshop papers.

I should mention that the idea to identify points of encounter between International Relations, modern systems theory and conflict studies originated from many fruitful and challenging discussions I had with my colleagues in the project ‘The European Union and Border Conflicts: The Impact of Integration and Association’ (Euborderconf: 5th framework programme of the EU with co-sponsoring from the Brisith Academy). I am hence very grateful to those colleagues and friends from the Euborderconf-Project who participated at the ‘Contradiction!’ workshop in Bielefeld, namely Olga Demetriou, Thomas Diez, Katy Hayward, Michelle Pace, Sergei Prozorov, Bahar Rumelili and Haim Yacobi—not only have they provided critical ‘perturbations’ to the lively discussions at the workshop but they have also shown great imperturbability at our somewhat lengthy search for a cosy restaurant in winterly Bielefeld. I also would like to thank Mathias Albert for reading and commenting on the entire manuscript of this book as well as for his detailed and stimulating comments on it. Many thanks also to the three anonymous referees for their very helpful comments. I am particularly grateful to Richard Little,
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Many thanks go to my friend Tobias Werron for our discussions on world society (in singular) and world cups (in plural). Anna Sigl has been at my side with her love, for which I am most grateful.

My interest in world politics and theoretical issues would not have grown, if it was not for the intellectual and emotional seeds planted and nourished by my wonderful family. I hence dedicate this book with love to my parents, Annegret and Franz Stetter, as well as to my grandmother Philippine Läufer.

Stephan Stetter
Bielefeld and Berlin, February 2007
Introduction: Points of encounter

Stephan Stetter

‘Jedes ausgesprochene Wort erregt den Gegensinn.’
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in Die Wahlverwandtschaften
(Goethe 1999:149)

‘Every word spoken excites its contradiction.’
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in Elective Affinities
(Goethe 1994:139)

Observations: modern systems theory, world society and the study of conflicts in International Relations

Against the background of the manifold political fractures and tensions in world society, the oracle that in the post-Cold War era human civilization has reached the ‘end of history’ appears today as a rather hasty prediction. Acknowledging the endurance of history and conflict, the discipline of International Relations (IR) has engaged in recent years in fascinating discussions of how conflicts in the ‘post-Westphalian order’ can be conceptualized. These discussions have brought up a wealth of empirical and theoretical insights into the main dynamics which structure the prevalence of conflicts in international relations. What is the specific contribution which the theory of world society, as developed in Luhmannian systems theory, has to offer to these debates? This book aims to provide some answers to this question. The plural ‘answers’ has been chosen with careful consideration. Firstly, notwithstanding the joint theoretical platform which most of the contributors to this volume share, the way in which they relate modern systems theory to the study of conflicts in IR differs—and so do the answers they derive from their analyses. Secondly, the answers provided in this volume do not stand in isolation to general debates in IR and, it is the specific way in which the individual standpoint of each author in relation to his or her take on theoretical and empirical debates in IR affects the ‘answer’ chosen. At the same time, however, all contributions to this volume are covered by a shared conceptual umbrella. Hence, it is the main guiding line of this book to assess the usefulness of modern systems theory for the study of territorial conflicts in world society. In that context, the ability of modern systems theory to become part and parcel of IR theorizing crucially depends on the theory’s openness to engage in serious dialogue with both other theoretical approaches and concrete empirical issues dealt with in more established IR approaches. By discussing possible contributions of the theory of world society in modern systems theory to the study of conflicts in IR,
this book aims to engage in such a dialogue and thereby to provide a fresh impetus for theoretically informed reasoning on this important subject matter—while in turn inviting the wider IR community to engage more intensively with the theory of world society and its potential merits for the study of world politics.

This introductory chapter does not attempt to provide a comprehensive overview on the theory of world society in modern systems theory, for this is clearly beyond the more modest scope of this book and, indeed, these opening remarks. Rather, it aims to set the stage for the debate on the relationship between the theory of world society in modern systems theory and the study of conflicts in IR which unfolds in the various contributions to this volume. In order to set the stage for this discussion, the subsequent section will outline briefly the main parameters of the theory of world society in modern systems theory. In a second step, it will discuss the differences and similarities between the theory of world society in modern systems theory, on the one hand, and alternative world society approaches, such as world-systems analysis in Immanuel Wallerstein’s tradition, the world polity approach of the Stanford School and the international society/world society nexus in the English School, on the other.

World society in modern systems theory and beyond

At first sight, the theory of world society in modern systems theory might be mistaken for a rather Utopian project, namely a theoretical framework which refers to a world integrated by globally shared norms and values. It is, therefore, paramount to emphasize that the notion of world society in modern systems theory stands in stark contrast to globally oriented ‘communitarian’ approaches, while paying tribute to its sociological roots. For modern systems theory, such a normative approach to the study of society conflates ‘community’ with ‘society’, or Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft in the terms developed by nineteenth century sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1963). On this basis, the theory of world society in modern systems theory builds upon the insight that ‘society’ does not refer to a shared sense of belonging or identification between human beings but rather to (complex) patterns of inter-relation and inter-dependence which can, by definition, occur without processes of community-building. Society is thus understood as the highest-order social system possible which is constituted by and encompasses all communications. However, in contrast to a strong tradition in the social sciences, modern systems theory holds that communication cannot be conceptualized adequately in terms of classical, actor-centred sender-receiver models. Hence, in modern systems theory ‘communication’ is understood as the unity of the difference of three contingent selections, namely information (something must be ‘chosen’ as a piece of information at the expense of what is not chosen), utterance (i.e. this information is uttered in a specific manner and not another) and understanding (i.e. it is understood in one way and not another). The subsequent communicative act of rejection or acceptance (which again consists of information, utterance and understanding) is then, already, a connective communication. By arguing that communication, and not individual actors (as implied by sender-receiver models), forms the basic unit of society, modern systems theory shifts the focus of analysis towards the evolutionary dynamics that shape both the processes of
connectivity between communications as well as the worldwide production of both ‘isomorphic’ structures and ‘heteromorphic’ bifurcations that result from communication (see Wimmer 2002b).

Moreover, since all communication is (either potentially or actually) global in its reach, there is today no communication (and thus no society) outside world society. It is, however, not merely the connectivity of communications that constitutes world society but rather the way in which the repeated connectivity of communications generates specific semantics and structures of society. This is then also the reason why the ‘horizon’ of the world is embedded in every communication. Therefore, the term world society refers to more than a mere empirical observation of a quasi-mechanical connectivity of communications. In other words, in each communication society observes itself as ‘world society’. Finally, since communication can always be accepted and rejected, world society is by definition not internally integrated but characterized by manifold forms of internal differentiation. By elaborating on a common theme in sociology, modern systems theory argues that the main form of internal differentiation in world society is today located on the functional level, i.e. the differentiation into specific functional systems, such as politics, economics, religion, law and others. Each of these systems operates on the general basis of communication (and is thus a social system within world society) but can be distinguished from other social systems through a specific way in which communications are processed within each system. To pick but one example, communications are recognized as ‘political’ if they relate to the symbolized media of communication of the political system of world society, i.e. ‘power’ (see Luhmann 1988a; for a critique Guzzini 2004). Focusing on such specific characteristics of communication allows not only the ‘location of the political’ in society to be identified (Stäheli 2000), it also helps to detect the ways in which (political) communication leads to both integration and disintegration and allows the emergence of inequality and exclusion, as well as political antagonisms and conflict in world society, to be addressed (Stichweh 2000b; Stäheli 2000).

Apart from the theory of world society in modern systems theory, there are several other schools of thought in sociology and IR that address ‘world society’. This section will discuss three of these approaches, namely world-systems analysis by Wallerstein, Chase-Dunn and Hall, the world polity approach by Meyer and collaborators as well as the nexus between international society/world society in the English School from Wight to Buzan. While this section will outline in particular the differences between modern systems theory, on the one hand, and these three approaches, on the other, this should not divert attention from the similarities between them. Thus, what unites all of these approaches is that they transcend the somewhat trivial observation of interdependence in a globalized context and identify the structural features which lead to the emergence of world society and which structure world politics.

The theory of world-systems, which was originally developed by Wallerstein, focuses on global inter-connectedness and global patterns of economic transactions that have developed since the ‘long sixteenth century’ (see Wallerstein 1974b). Somewhat related to the focus in modern systems theory on dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in world society, world-systems analysis unfolds a comprehensive explanation for the internal fragmentation of world society, namely the huge economic differences between different regions. By doing so, world-systems analysis provided a powerful critique of the
modernization literature of the 1960s and 70s. Moreover, it is on this basis that Wallerstein rejects the notion of society as being too state-centred, thereby arguably conflating the notions of society (*Gesellschaft*) and community (*Gemeinschaft*) referred to above (Greve and Heintz 2005; World Society Research Group 2000). While Wallerstein focuses almost exclusively on economic inequalities between a rich (Western) centre and a disadvantaged (non-Western) periphery, modern systems theory has a rather de-territorialized understanding of global inequalities. More specifically, modern systems theory identifies inclusion and exclusion in many different societal spheres, e.g. health, education, economics, politics, law, etc.—and these exclusions do not always coalesce in territorial terms. While it is true that dynamics of exclusion in one social system often spurs ‘chain exclusions’ across several social spheres within specific territorialities, such developments need not necessarily be the case. From a territorial perspective, this multilayered approach to inclusion and exclusion in modern systems theory thus blurs the borders of inclusion and exclusion, which Wallerstein conceptualizes in rather one-dimensional centre/periphery terms. A crucial difference between both theories then also relates to the level of analysis. Thus, according to Wallerstein world society is characterized by the dominance of one social system, namely economics, whereas modern systems theory stresses that in a functionally differentiated society there is no primacy of any social system (Wallerstein 1980).

Somewhat echoing this observation, Chase-Dunn, Hall and others have then further developed world-systems analysis. While the economic dimension remains central to these writers, they analyze the global structural impact of other factors such as cultural dynamics, ecological issues and global communication facilities, as well as political dynamics (see Chase-Dunn 1999; Chase-Dunn and Grimes 1995; Hall 2002a). Thus, world-systems are now defined ‘as intersocietal networks in which the interactions (e.g. trade, warfare, intermarriage) are important for the reproduction of the internal structures of the composite units and importantly affect changes that occur in these local structures’ (Chase-Dunn and Grimes 1995:391). This focus on intersocietal networks has proven particularly helpful in advancing a historical perspective on world-systems and the ways in which interaction networks developed in the course of human civilization from regionally contained ‘empires’ to global ‘political/military interaction networks’ (ibid.: 392). However, despite the focus on intersocietal networks, there is no overarching notion of ‘society’ in world-systems analysis. Thus, the contradictions, inequalities (and conflicts) in the globalized ‘contemporary world-system of “casino capitalism”’ (Chase-Dunn 1999:187) are interpreted as a systemic feature of an ‘intersocietal system’ (ibid.). That also is the reason why world-systems analysis refers to world society with rather normative undertones, i.e. as a vision of a ‘more humane, democratic, balanced and sustainable world society’ (Chase-Dunn 1999:187).

A different understanding of world society is then advanced by the world polity approach of the Stanford School (Meyer, Rubinson, Ramirez and Boli-Bennett 1977; Meyer, Boli, Thomas and Ramirez 1998) Meyer et al. argue from a sociological institutionalist perspective that there are powerful global ‘isomorphic’ processes, i.e. specific cultural models that reproduce themselves in different settings. They refer, in particular, to the global expansion of the ‘state model’ as the main political unit in world politics. Thus, the isomorphic reproduction of the state on a global scale, which consolidated itself after World War II and the decolonization period, cannot be
understood adequately from the perspective of a specific national system but rather from the perspective of the ‘isomorphic qualities’ of the respective social model—such as the ‘state’ but also other cultural models such as the ‘university model’ in global education, ‘the league model’ in global sports etc. With a view to IR, Barry Buzan rightly emphasizes that this understanding of world society in the Stanford School comes close to the conceptualization of ‘international society’ in the English School, namely that there are ‘powerful worldwide models about how humans should organize themselves’ (Buzan 2004:73).

While modern systems theory shares with the Stanford School its focus on global processes of structural diffusion, the Stanford School is less interested in specifying the precise ‘operative forms’ through which these processes become constituted in the first place. While modern systems theory focuses on the dynamics of communication within different social systems, Stichweh has noted that in the Stanford School it is ‘not easy to see what should form the basic or elementary unit of a process of cultural construction’ (Stichweh 2000b:239). Moreover, through its emphasis on a shared culture, the world polity approach arguably tends to reproduce the problematic conflation between society and community mentioned above. Thus, by arguing that ‘world society celebrates, expands, and standardizes strong but culturally somewhat tamed national actors’ (Meyer, Boli, Thomas and Ramirez 1998:173), the Stanford School sketches out a ‘world polity’ that at least to some extent depends on shared norms and values. It is probably for this reason that the Stanford School also tends to neglect dynamics of disintegration and inequality in world society (Greve and Heintz 2005:102). In contrast, modern systems theory advances a rather structural notion of global isomorphic processes, such as the global availability of different media of communication (e.g. power, money, truth etc.) and specific functions and structures of distinct social systems, thereby highlighting the non-cultural, systemic patterns of integration in world society.

Finally, within IR it has primarily been the English School which has discussed the notion of world society. This dates back to Martin Wight’s focus on the relationship between international society and interhuman cultural unity. Thus, Wight argues ‘that we must assume that a states-system will not come into being without a degree of cultural unity among its members’ (Wight 1977:31). As Buzan has argued, the notion of world society, while not explicitly mentioned here, is underlying this argument since international society is contrasted with a global societal system of cultural bonds. Thus, Wight

"infers the idea that world society is defined by common culture shared perhaps at the level of individuals, and certainly at the level of elites, and that the development of international society requires the existence of world society in these terms as a precondition."

(Buzan 2004:31–32)

In a similar way, Hedley Bull identifies world society in relation to shared cultural orientations of its constituent units, which are however individual actors and not communications, as modern systems theory would hold. Thus,