The Social Theory of Self-Referential Systems: Probing its ‘Value-added’ and Conditions of Connectivity in IR

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I. Introduction

The theory of autopoietic social systems, whose central representative is the recently deceased Niklas Luhmann, has so far been mainly ignored in the IR literature. Recently, there have been attempts to change this. Systems theoretical ideas inform current research project (Kratochwil, 1999) and are recommended for use to the community of IR researchers (Albert, 1999). This workshop, of course, is devoted to systems theory. In view of these developments, one is tempted to ask polemically, paraphrasing the late Susan Strange (1986), if this is the most recent fad in our discipline. Put more objectively, the question is what is the possible contribution of systems theory to the study of world politics? This is a big question which cannot be answered in one paper. For the purpose of this essay, the question is more narrowly focused. The theory of self-referential systems is a loosely coupled mass of partial theories (Stichweh, 1999, 67). I decompose this mass and probe what is the potential ‘value-added’ of one central component of systems theory, namely media theory, in the study of world politics. I end by discussing the conditions of connectivity of the theory in the discipline of IR.

My first thesis is that a theory the subject matter of which is the modern world society with its functional subsystems steered by communication is not of much use to students of IR. I do not want to claim that a media-theoretical analysis of politics is only justified if one wants to know what is the case within territorial states. No, it also helps us with understanding those regions of world politics, in which one can observe the emergence of political systems beyond the state. This is my second thesis which I support by redescribing the EU from a systems theoretical point of view. The exercise demonstrates that media theory can contribute to an increase in the constructive powers of the community of IR researchers. My final thesis is that despite this ‘value-added’, there are sociology of knowledge reasons to believe that the conditions of connectivity of systems theory in the discipline of IR are poor. Notwithstanding current attempts to import it into IR, systems theory is unlikely to have a significant impact on the field.

II. Politics as a Communication Medium

A central question of sociological theories is what makes social action and social order possible in view of the problem of double contingency. After all, ‘action cannot take place if alter makes his action dependent on how ego acts, and ego wants to connect his action to alter’s’ (Luhmann, 1996, p. 103). Traditionally, this problem is solved by pointing to the binding force of shared norms and values or to the complementarity of individual goal orientations in a functionally differentiated society. The theory of self-referential systems provides another, rather more original solution to the puzzle of double contingency. Society is an operatively closed system of communication which functions so as to reduce world complexity through the temporary fixing of meaning. In the communicative process, the system acquires and processes information about itself and the world: it decomposes reality, i.e., absorbs complexity by selecting a particular meaning from the endless horizon of

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1 Symptomatic for this state of affairs is that in the index of Robert Jervis’ (1999) price-winning book on the importance of systems theoretical analyses in IR, there is neither an entry for Luhmann nor for autopoiesis.
2 If this assessment also applies to other components of systems theory such as its model of evolution is not addressed in this paper (but see Kratochwil, 1999).
3 On the relationship between complexity and contingency, this can be said. A system (ego) experiences the contingent freedom to act of systems in its environment (relevant others) as complexity (cf. Willke, 1996a, pp. 29-31).
meaning (actualities) that is the world. In this way, the system constitutes its own identity and delimits its environment. This is an on-going process as the communications composing the system ‘have nor duration and thus must be constantly reproduced by the system’ (Luhmann, 1996, p. 11). Thus, society is conceptualized as a system which is primarily concerned with the continuation of communicative acts. Following Humberto Maturana, Luhmann refers to this recursive reproduction of the social system - its structure and units - in which outputs are used as inputs as autopoiesis.

The autopoiesis of the modern society, i.e., the instantiation of social order is steered by symbolically generalized communication media. They serve the purpose of ‘reducing the probability that a communication [by ego] is rejected’ by alter (Luhmann, 1990a, p. 40). In societies with low complexity, lifeworld structures (e.g. traditions, rituals, customs) and the situative presuppositions of face-to-face interaction tend to ensure the acceptance of communication, i.e., the absorption of contingency. The spread of writing and later the invention of the printing press are apt to undermine this solution to the problem of social order by extending the reach of communication to those absent in time and space: this tends to bring out the selectivity of the communicated meaning, e.g. when a culture gap separates the writer from the reader. Consequently, it becomes increasingly unlikely that alter accepts the meaning content selected by ego as a premise of her own behavior. In brief, with the recognition of the contingency of the content of communication, conflicts over communication become probable (cf. Luhmann, 1988, p. 5).

Systems theory argues that in late archaic societies particular media developed by which the improbability of communication was overcome (Luhmann, 1998, pp. 322-32). These were preadaptive advances which only evolved into fully developed symbolically generalized communication media in modern society. Media condition the selection of the meaning to be communicated, thus enhancing the chances that the selection is accepted (Luhmann, 1998, p. 382). This can be further elaborated. First, the symbolic generalization of media facilitates the channeling of communication. By manipulating media-specific symbols (e.g. symbols of rule) ego and alter can adapt their meaning proposals to each other’s intentionality and reality constructs (Luhmann, 1991a, p. 177). In this way, communication can be kept on track.

Second, the binary coding of the media makes possible a duplication of every statement according to the system-specific code-values (e.g. true/untrue or superior/inferior). This opens up new possibilities for communication as it frees the crossing from one value (e.g. superior) to the other (inferior) from moral consequences (Luhmann, 1998, p. 361). On the other hand, communication coded in such a way radicalizes the problem of double contingency. The assignment of code-values by ego and alter must be coordinated if social action and social order are to be possible. This is accomplished through social-regulative motivating mechanisms. They are institutionalized in media-specific programs such as ideologies or government programs (Luhmann, 1998, p. 377). A government program, for instance, restricts the contents of power-related communication and thus constructs a structuring expectation as to what communication is and is not acceptable in the political system. “One can accept a

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4 This type of systems theory thus employs a radical anti-humanist concept of society. Society does not consist of people, but communications which form an ‘emergent reality sui generis’ (Luhmann, 1998, p. 105).

5 A communicative act consists of information, utterance and understanding. The acceptance or rejection of the communicated meaning is a connective act.

6 For instance, power can only be recognized and employed ‘if the behavior of the participants is attributed to a code which describes a situation as a power situation’ (Luhmann, 1994b, p. 118).

7 Binarisation thus plays a crucial role in the transition from stratified societies, in which all positive values (true, good, strong, etc.) come together at the top, to functionally differentiated societies in which system-specific criteria govern the allocation of the values.
proposed communication, if one knows that its selection meets certain conditions’ (Luhmann, 1998, p. 321). Third, the capacity of programs to reduce the probability that a communication is rejected is limited. Programs change frequently. Therefore, they must be programmed themselves. This is the task of system-specific ‘inviolate levels’ or ‘contingency formulae’ which reduce undetermined contingency to determined or at least determinable contingency (Luhmann, 1991a, p. 184). For politics, legitimacy is such a contingency formula (Luhmann, 1998, p. 470).

In the process of socio-cultural evolution and the functional differentiation of political rule in the form of the territorially based sovereign state universally distributed virtual violence was ‘divided into legitimate and illegitimate violence’ (Luhmann, 1998, p. 414). The concept of legitimacy presupposes that particular forms of power-related communication, e.g. those decisions which were arrived at in a particular rule-governed process are accepted (Willke, 1996b, pp. 48-52, general: Luhmann, 1997). The contingency formula legitimacy thus provides guideposts for behavioral orientation and steers the attribution of causal powers in the medium of power. This increases the probability that the addressee of power-related communication accepts the decision imposed on her as the premise of her own behavior. Consequently, violence as a means of rule loses its importance. In the modern state, politics steered by communication is civilized.

Legality is a central component of legitimacy in modern political systems. ‘Effective power has to be lawful power’ (Luhmann, 1994a, p. 164). Further, the insertion of the law-code, i.e., the distinction between lawful/unlawful, into the hierarchically organized political system makes politics recursive. This renders possible the ‘overpowering even of the holder of supreme power’ by peaceful means (Luhmann, 1994a, p. 166). In this way, the secondary coding of power by way of law contributes to the civilization of politics. Nevertheless, in the final instance the successful transformation of the improbability of the acceptance of power-related communication into a probability depends on the availability of instruments of force. The control over the means of physical violence is thus the ultimate ‘foundation of the power medium’ (Luhmann, 1998, p. 380).

This sketch of the function of communication media in the construction of political order suggests that media theory is not of much use to students of world politics. There is no effective code-guided communication in world politics, neither in terms of a power-code nor a law-code: the problem of double contingency remains unresolved. Thus political communication tends to be unsuccessful, i.e. state B is likely to reject what state A communicates as the premise of its behavior. Therefore, disorder, including armed conflict, is quite common in the international arena. In short, world politics cannot be conceptualized as a system of communication.

However, this pessimistic assessment of the value of media theory in the study of world politics has to be qualified. There are developments which point to an epochal change of the structure of world politics from segmentation to functional differentiation. For instance, international organizations and regimes, whose number and importance has increased significantly in the last decade, are (possibly) precursors of mechanisms of the distribution of power in a functionally differentiated world political system. More important for the evaluation of the applicability of media theory to world politics is that interstate communication and behavior patterns are not homogenous across regions. In Europe and perhaps elsewhere political integration leads to the development of political systems

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8 For an interesting overview of the evolution of politics and the state from a Luhmann-inspired systems theoretical perspective, see Wimmer (1996).
9 If the implementation of a directive depends on the use of force, then the communicative act constituting the directive was unsuccessful.
overarching the territorial state. Media theory can fruitfully be employed to analyze the formation of such political orders beyond the state.\textsuperscript{10}

There is a general consensus among scholars that European integration started off as a governance structure dominated by the member states. But already in the 1950s and 1960s, some researchers predicted that European integration would soon evolve beyond intergovernmentalism and develop a dynamic of its own (e.g. Lindberg, 1967). The de-differentiation of the European Communities in the 1970s, brought about by the strengthening of the position of the member states (e.g. Luxemburg compromise, European Council), seemed to contradict this thesis. In the wake of the adoption of the Single European Act, however, the doldrums period in integration was overcome. Thus, today the thesis of an emergent political system in integrated Europe is more topical than ever. A growing number of empirical studies indicate that within its competence the EU is engaged in the self-referential production of binding collective decisions (cf. Hix, 1999). In more and more issue-areas, the outside determination of integration, i.e., its instrumentalization by the member states, gives way to the self-determination of an operatively closed system in which the member states together with other organizations form a heterarchical network of political communication.

Thus, unlike traditional interstate relations, the EU can be described as a system of communication steered by media. The political-administrative decisions made in the system are guided by programs (e.g. work program of the Commission, program of the Presidency) and must meet strict conditions in order to count as legitimate. For instance, the adoption of binding measures by the Council of Ministers together with the Commission and the European Parliament, or the adoption of implementing decisions in the framework of comitology, has to follow the relevant procedural rules. These rules are not merely conventions, i.e., sedimented intersubjective knowledge as it also exists in the interstate system, but procedures with a legal status. In the EU, the ‘use of power is tied to the pre-decision regarding its lawfulness/unlawfulness’ Luhmann, 1994a, 166). And such decisions can be contested before the European Court of Justice. In sum, in the EU the double contingency of power relations - both ego and alter can act differently - is reduced by symbolically generalized communication media.

III. A Systems Theoretical Redescription of the EU

In view of its structure, the EU is sometimes referred to as a postmodern form of state (Caporaso, 1996, pp. 44-48). Two structural features are of particular importance in this regard. First, the internal differentiation according to center/periphery is not pronounced. The institutional core of the EU has limited decision-making powers. Further, the center has only limited resources of its own (money, information, etc.).\textsuperscript{11} In many issue-areas, it is dependent on the cooperation with other actors (private and public) when it comes to the formulation and implementation of policies. A second feature of the EU is that politics is spatially divided up. Its re-integration occurs in heterarchical networks (formal and informal) of political communication.

\textsuperscript{10} I am not aware of any work which systematically employs the theory of self referential systems to study the EU. However, some researchers did discuss the relevance of systems theoretical ideas for integration research. Thus, one finds conceptual reflections about future research programs (Albert, 1999) or references to components of systems theory which, however, leave out much of the substance of the theory (Jachtenfuchs, 1995).

\textsuperscript{11} In particular, the EU has no monopoly on the use of force, i.e., it lacks the feature which according to Max Weber characterizes the modern state.
communication among supranational, national and subnational actors. From the perspective of media theory, this raises the question what vocabulary did the EU develop to describe its ‘postmodern’ structure?

As already noted, the theory of self-reference conceptualizes society as a structured, ongoing process of meaning-selecting communications. What regulates the selection of meanings? Semantics. Social systems react to the fleetingness of communicative acts by selecting meanings or themes (concepts, ideas) and preserving them in the form of semantics or meaning-giving identities. A semantics thus constitutes the structure ‘that makes it possible to distinguish appropriate from inappropriate contributions or even correct from incorrect uses of themes in theme-related communication’ (Luhmann, 1996, 163, 157; 1994a, p. 77). Structured in this way, communication gives rise to a stable meaning world.

As compared to developed territorially based systems, the political semantics of the EU - the conceptual apparatus by which it describes itself - is insufficiently worked out. The West European political systems, for instance, describe themselves as welfare states. This formula thematically guides political communication, empowering some policies and disabling others. Conversely, the political system of the EU has only a vague notion of what it is or wants to be, not least because the various EU institutions have quite different ideas about this. The EU thus suffers from an ‘identity crisis’. This is not system-threatening, but it leads to insufficiencies.

One can identify at least three negative consequences of the ‘identity crisis’ of the EU. First, in the EU there exists a permanent power inflation: the policy-makers make more decisions than they can carry out in case of conflict.12 The EU is neither a military power nor a welfare state. But these structural limits are not, or only insufficiently, thematized in the self-description of the system. The diffuse identity of the EU thus contributes to the system having unrealistic expectations of, and attributing too much power to, itself: the systemic organizations (e.g. Council of Ministers, European Parliament) engage in the inflationary production of power-related communication which is not backed by enforcement mechanisms. A case in point is the Common Foreign and Security Policy with its discrepancy of declaratory policy and actual policy.13

Second, due to its underdeveloped political identity, the EU does not have the semantic resources to cover all issue-areas. For instance, power-related communication in labor market and tax policies is only partly self-determined by the European system: there are no guiding ideas or key concepts which could effectively steer the communication process. The resulting plethora of uncoordinated contributions severely restricts the capability of the system to formulate coherent solutions to insufficiencies such as the high structural unemployment across EU countries. Third, in the absence of a clear identity, the EU lacks a schemata with the help of which it could thematize and plan its own systemic development. For the development of the state of law in the 18th and 19th century, the theories elaborated by John Locke, Montesquieu and others, which the system copied within itself, were crucial. Taking another example, the political economic theory formulated by John Maynard Keynes informed, as a theory of the system within the system, the construction of the modern welfare state. The EU, on the other hand, does not have such semantic resources to guide its self-reflection and self-development. True, sometimes big projects such as Economic and Monetary Union are carried out. But such history-making events are, from the point of view of the EU, chance events. They are the result of uncoordinated thematic variations in national political discourses, selections of some of the proposed measures in intergovernmental

12 In the case of power, ‘inflation consists in announcing a policy which can not be implemented’ (Luhmann, 1998, p. 385).
13 Christopher Hill (1993) refers to this discrepancy as the ‘capability-expectations gap’.
conferences and subsequent restabilizations of the EU system by changes in the institutional structure (cf. Moravcsik, 1998). In brief, evolution, not self-determination, shapes the fate of the EU.

From the perspective of systems theory, science can contribute to the ‘identity formation’ of the EU and thus to the solution of the shortcomings just mentioned. While researchers cannot impose an identity on the emerging political system, they can invent and evaluate semantics and submit them to the system. The EU can either reject these proposals or adopt them for thematically steering its own development.\(^\text{14}\)

In the literature on European integration, there are two ideas which because of their good conceptual elaboration, are possible candidates for development theories of the system within the system: the idea of the Westphalian state and that of the regulatory state. The former - conceptualized in terms of territorial exclusivity, internal and external sovereignty, the hierarchical organization of the state, a large portfolio of welfare tasks and other features - has often served as a baseline in integration studies for measuring the deviation of reality from, or its convergence on, an ideal type. At least implicitly, the Westphalian state structured the ‘great debate’ among intergouvernementalists and neofunctionalists in which, among other things, the question was raised what is the ‘nature’ of the integrative arrangement in Europe (cf. Nelsen/Stubb, 1998, pp. 139-43; 147-71). Systems theory shares the pessimistic position which intergouvernementalists put forth in the debate and believes that a transformation of the EU into a Westphalian-type state is highly unlikely.\(^\text{15}\) But it arrives at this conclusion for different reasons.

The self-referential autonomization of the EU differs from the evolution of sovereign political systems in Europe at the end of feudalism. In the 16th century and thereafter, the institutionalization of the symbolically generalized communication medium power proceeded hand in hand with the differentiation of other functional subsystems. The emergence of the political system of the EU, on the other hand, occurs in a completely different context. The functional regions of modern society such as the economy or science are highly complex autopoietic systems with a global reach. Under these conditions, it is no longer possible to build the EU up into a Westphalian state which determines societal developments by direct control. Any such attempt would result in unforeseen and unforeseeable side effects because of the functionally differentiated and mutually blocking rationalities of the operatively closed subsystems. Or such a dirigiste policy would simply fail to achieve its end because the global subsystems would circumvent the local irritations.

The same reasons, namely the autopoiesis and globalization of the subsystems of world society, limit the usefulness of the idea of the regulatory state for the self-guidance of the EU. According to this idea, European politics should restrict itself to the correction of market failures which overtax the problem-solving capacity of unilateral policies (Majone, 1996). An example of such a market failure are cross-border negative externalities. Since in the EU negative integration led to a significant increase in interdependencies, the traditional intergouvernemental cooperation is no longer able to contain these externalities. The result is ‘international regulatory failure’ (Majone, cited in Caporaso, 1996, p. 41). Under these conditions, supranational regulation is required to solve transnational problems. Further, the

\(^{14}\) Luhmann is not a poststructuralist, i.e., he does not believe that systems are constituted by semantics. For him, self-descriptions are always ex post operations. But this does not exclude that in semantics new ideas can be learned and tested before they are implemented in the structural context of differentiations (Luhmann, 1998, p. 539).

\(^{15}\) Among the factors preventing the fusion of the existing European states into a new great power, which intergouvernementalists identify, are e.g. the lack of a European nation or the high importance which member states attach to the defense of their sovereignty.
idea of a European regulatory state implies that welfare policies such as income redistribution and foreign policies such as peace-enforcement remain in the hands of the individual member states.

As distinguished from the policies just mentioned, which belong to the portfolio of the Westphalian state, the production of regulatory policy is not expensive. However, firms complying with the regulations have to bear significant costs. In a global economy, such costs are an important factor bearing on firms’ competitiveness. Firms feeling ‘threatened’ by regulations are thus likely to try to influence policy-makers in their favor. In case such a capture of politics is unsuccessful, there still remains the option of relocating the firms’ operations outside the jurisdiction of the regulatory state.

Just like the Westphalian state, the regulatory state thus confronts the problem that the modern world society with its autopoietic subsystems undermines its steering capacity. Would either of these two guiding ideas shape the operations of the EU, then this would result in the overload of the political system. In what follows, I synthesize the concepts of the supervising state and the international state in order to sketch an alternative form of state which, from the point of view of systems theory, would increase the capability of the EU to determine its own functioning.

IV. Towards an International Supervising State

The concept of the supervising state was developed by Helmut Willke (1996b) and others as a systems theoretical response to the sovereignty-at-bay problematic.\(^\text{16}\) It is based on two assumptions. First, there is a need for the governance of society and its autopoietic subsystems. The functional differentiation of society has led to a multiplication of collective or system-wide risks such as those associated with biotechnology or environmental pollution. They cannot be contained by the functional subsystems in which they originate because these systemic ‘parts’ have become too specialized. Each autopoietic ‘system has only that contact with the environment which it creates itself. There is no environment ‘in itself’ (Luhmann, cited in Reese-Schäfer, 1996, p. 49). The system gains the information it needs for the construction of its environment by employing code-guided distinctions to structure its internal meaning processing. In this way, each functional subsystem creates its Eigenworld, irrespective of what the ‘outside’ looks like (Luhmann, 1994b, p. 207). In brief, in modern society there is no privileged point of view from which the risks generated by the systemic ‘parts’ could be surveyed and assessed. This makes the containment of system-wide risks rather difficult. Second, in a complex, differentiated society the traditional instruments by which governments intervene authoritatively in society have become ineffective (Willke, 1996b, pp. 107-44). After all, the self-referential subsystems determine themselves how they react to irritations by the environment: the outputs of societal subsystems cannot be conditioned by political inputs.\(^\text{17}\) However, this does not mean that there is no way to superintend the operations of the interdependent functional subsystems, thus limiting the collective risks they generate. But this task calls for new strategies.

A functional equivalent to the rule of politics over society is context management. Hereby the state takes on the role of a second-order observer which examines how the rule-guided

\(^{16}\) Luhmann is less optimistic than Willke regarding the possibility of steering modern society. For him, the development of modern social systems is an evolutionary process. It can not, or only to a very limited extent, be shaped by purposive-rational interventions (cf. Luhmann, 1994b, pp. 104-16).

\(^{17}\) Put differently, ‘results within the scope of one medium can only be changed by operations within the same medium’ (Luhmann, 1998, p. 373). One cannot neutralize power by love or research.
modus operandi of the subsystemic organizations or corporate actors generates collective risks (Willke, 1996b, pp. 342-49). The thematization by the state of dysfunctional strategies pursued by the subsystemic corporate actors to solve universal system-problems such as the reduction of scarcity or the validation of truth is a first step towards reintegrating the functionally differentiated society. In a next step, the task of the state is to bring together the corporate actors of the various subsystems so that in the context of heterarchically organized negotiation systems, they can engage in systemic discourses with a view to coming up with less risky equivalents to their current problem-solving strategies. In this phase of context management, the goal is the ‘reactivation of latent possibilities’ (Willke, 1996b, p. 336). This is difficult. It requires of the operatively autonomous corporate actors that they recognize the contingency and malleability of their systemic identities and their behavior patterns. Only then can they (perhaps) work out common problem-solving strategies. The state can contribute to such an outcome by pursuing a carrot-and-stick policy in order to prevent actors from free-riding and increase their readiness to coordinate their modes of operation.

The weakness of the systems theoretical concept of the supervising state is its territorial focus. Willke believes that this link between politics and a clearly defined territory is crucial. Only within a state can there be a collective identity on the basis of which the subsystemic corporate actors are enabled to negotiate common strategies for the limitation of collective risks. But as the recent constructivist turn in IR shows, this pessimism regarding the possibility of systemic identities beyond the territorial state is unjustified. Alexander Wendt (1998) uses the concept of the international state in order to denote a heterarchical structure of transnational authority which, without being sovereign, performs government functions. One of the features of this decentralized system of rule is that those state and non-state actors participating in it have a shared identity. The international state thus differs from a Cosmopolis with its centralization of the means of violence (idealism), on the one hand, and from a purposive-rational association of egoistic-utilitarian actors (neoliberal institutionalism), on the other.

Under what conditions is an international state likely to form? At a minimum, there needs to exists an international society in which states accord each other equal legal status (cf. Buzan, 1993, pp. 343-48). Within this ideational context, one can identify various mechanisms which may lead to the internationalization of political authority. The growing international interdependence is of central importance in this regard. Interdependence has not only advantages. It also generates negative externalities and, associated with this, the potential for conflicts. Rational actors react to this threat by checking the cross-border effects of their actions. Depending on this evaluation, they can then pursue a policy of unilateral restraint or self-interested obligation in order to minimize the costs of interdependence and maximize its benefits (Crawford, 1991, pp. 453-56). However, interdependence, in particular the recognition by actors that they share a common fate, may have additional consequences which go beyond the utilitarian calculus just described. Interdependence may promote new ‘ideas

18 As regards the notion of systemic discourses, there exists an affinity between systems theory and the theory of communicative action. ‘In these two aspects, the goal of coming to an agreement and the absence of force, the idea of systemic discourses closely follows Habermas’ discourse model’ (Willke, 1993, p. 137). The difference is that systemic discourses are not oriented towards achieving intersubjective consensus. Rather, they are aimed at producing information regarding pan-societal risks which can be understood and accepted as the premise for behavioral changes by the operatively closed corporate actors of the functional subsystems (ibid., p. 138).

19 In an interesting move, Willke makes use of an idea of the neopragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty in his discussion of context management. He argues that the reactivation of latent possibilities is only feasible if subsystems and organizations are capable of irony (Willke, 196b, pp. 321-24). Thus for context management to work, systems have to entertain ‘radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary [they] currently use’ (Rorty, 1995, p. 73).
about who one is in a given situation’ (Wendt, 1999, p. 170). If this occurs, it is likely to happen in international institutions. Created for managing interdependencies, institutions provide fora in which the participating state and non-state actors can engage in identity-forming systemic discourses (Wendt, 1998, p. 398; for empirical evidence, see e.g. Finnemore, 1996). In brief, contra Willke there is reason to believe that systemic identities are not inextricably bound to the territorial state. This, in turn, implies that context management beyond the territorial state is possible.

Against this background, the concept of the international supervising state can be put forth as a serious contender around which a new semantics for the political system of the EU could be built up. Adopting such an alternative vocabulary would have two implications for the EU. First, the EU would define itself as the regional address of an international state with global reach. Second, this international state would set for itself the task of superintending the corporate actors of the global subsystems in order to help them with finding a way to systemically integrate the polycentric world society. Only such a globally oriented context management could contain the existential risks generated by the unreflective and uncoordinated muddling-through of the autopoietic subsystems and their corporate actors. Certain structural preconditions or preadaptive advances for the realization of the international supervising state already exist. International organizations such as the UN, G-8, WTO or ILO, which at the moment are not able to manage the collective risks coming within their purview, could provide the institutional infrastructure of the new international supervising state. At a minimum, such a development depends on the existence of a political entrepreneur who actively campaigns for an institutional reform, including a reorientation of the programs and policies, of the existing international organizations. The EU could play this role. Yet in order to do this, it would have to change its vocabulary by which it describes itself and adopt a new one centered on the idea of the international supervising state.

V. Conclusion: The ‘Value-added’ and the Conditions of Connectivity of Systems Theory in IR

The value of systems theory should not be judged on the basis of empiricist criteria. Systems theory is not committed to a correspondence theoretical program according to which it is the task of science to mirror ontological reality comprehensively and accurately. This makes it inappropriate to follow common practice in IR research by evaluating the theory’s contribution to our understanding of world politics on the basis of how much excess empirical content it has over alternative theories (cf. Lakatos, 1995, p. 116). Rather, systems theory should be assessed on its on terms: it is committed to a constructivist philosophy of science and this should be the framework within which its value in the study of world politics is judged. A central assumption of this framework is that the world-in-itself is an unmarked state. It is only given form through communication which ‘grasps something out of the actual referential horizon … and leaves other things aside (Lumann, 1996, p. 140, original emphasis). Thus the traditional assumption that science has privileged access to a thing-world

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20 This leaves open the question whether a collective identity no longer tied to the symbol ‘territory’ can exist without a foundation in another primordial symbol grounded in the ‘natural’ experiences of the actors’ lifeworld. Drawing loosely on systems theory, Albert (1999b) claims that even civil collective identities are at least partially constituted by the symbolic power of primordial constructs such as ethnies.

21 The systemic discourses between state and non-state actors, in which solutions to collective global risks are formulated, could take place in associative and parliamentary fora which are differentiated according to sectors (cf. Wolf, 1999, pp. 355-56).
unreachable for laymen no longer holds. Scientific knowledge differs from everyday knowledge only insofar as it is theoretically and methodologically informed and empirically substantiated. However, epistemological constructivism also argues that the ‘coincidence of the empirical and the real cannot be determined’ (Luhmann, 1998, p. 41). Therefore, for systems theory truth does not reside in the correspondence between statements and cognition-independent reality. Rather, truth is considered to be a ‘medium for constructions’ (Luhmann, 1994b, p. 224). This does not mean that in systems theory anything goes. True, the world cannot be discovered, it has to be made. Yet not all constructions are viable. ‘Anything goes if it works’ (Glasersfeld, 1996, p. 429, original emphasis). But does systems theory work?

Earlier in the paper, I argued that media theory can only be fruitfully employed to study a very limited range of international phenomena. World politics is not an autopoietic system steered by communication. Yes, there are real interaction effects among corporate actors which result in cross-border structural patterns. But despite all preadaptive advances, there is no communication medium which governs this interlocking of events. On the other hand, I qualified this pessimistic assessment by arguing that the EU is an emergent autopoietic system whose systemness is sufficiently pronounced so as to render viable its media theoretical redescription. By employing systems theoretical vocabulary, I was able to shed new light on the EU’s identity crisis and to propose a way out. This points to the core analytical interest of systems theory: ‘to break through the illusion of normality, to disregard experience and habit, and, in this sense (here, not intended as that of transcendental theory), to effect a phenomenological reduction’ (Luhmann, 1996, p. 114). Put differently, opening up thinking space by demonstrating the contingency and improbability of what exists and by designing alternative futures, this is the strength of systems theory with its commitment to epistemological constructivism and the method of functional analysis.

Systems theory is thus a tool the use of which could help IR researchers to increase their constructive powers. But what about the conditions of connectivity of such a European theory in the discipline dominated by Anglo-Saxon researchers? The short answer: they are bad. There are at least three sociology of knowledge reasons for this. First, systems theory does not belong to the category of ‘neat, helpful theories’ (Luhmann, cited in Reese-Schäfer, 1996, p. 19). The theory architecture is highly complex, the vocabulary difficult. And this is no accident: for systems theory, complexity is the hallmark of the modern world society, and the theory is designed so as ‘to stimulate complexity in order to explain complexity’ (Luhmann, 1996, p. xix). But in insisting on the need for complexity, the theory violates the principles of parsimony and concise, transparent writing which are stressed so much in the Anglo-Saxon IR literature. Second, mainstream IR is dominated by empiricist attitudes and action-theoretical research programs. This orientation is only partially, if at all, compatible with systems theory. Yet even those working outside the mainstream are unlikely to be attracted by systems theory. They will find a theory which hypostatizes communication and speaks of operatively closed function systems and of corporate actors who leave in Eigenworlds and remain for ever opaque to each other alien to their concerns. After all, critical IR theorists such as constructivists, feminists or theorists of communicative action focus on, among other things, intersubjective intentionalities and actor-centered communication processes as important elements shaping world politics.

Third, the current discussions within the discipline are mainly informed by theories which conceptualize world politics as a Hobbesian state of nature (realism) or as a governance structure increasingly governed by norms and rules (liberalism). The subject matter of systems theory, on the other hand, are the media-steered function systems of modern world society. In this regard, too, the conditions of connectivity of systems theory in IR are unfavorable. This leads to the conclusion that despite its potential ‘value-added’, systems theory is likely to
remain marginal to the study of world politics. Those who currently try to change this state of affairs thus have their work cut out.

References


