

Some Problems in Luhmann's Social Systems Theory: Differentiation, Integration, and Planning

POVZETEK (Nekateri problemi v Luhmannovi sistemski teoriji: diferenciacija, integracija in načrtovanje): Avtor dokazuje, da četudi Luhmannova teorija pravilno poudarja prevlado funkcionalne diferenciacije v moderni družbi, bi bila vendarle potrebna bolj natančna diskusija o segmentarni in stratifikacijski diferenciaciji, da bi lahko razumeli pomembne empirične pojave tako v predmoderni kot moderni družbi. Luhmannova teorija zanemara pomen redukcije kompleksnosti, ki jo je ustvarila segmentarna diferenciacija globalne družbe. Avtor prav tako dokazuje, da naj bi Luhmannov skepticizem do načrtovanja na makro ravni vodil do zaključka, da je evolucija vse, kar je potrebno za preživetje. Namesto tega naj bi se rešitve iskalo v nekaterih sofisticiranih konceptih, takšnih kot je na primer kontekstualna regulacija. Članek se zaključuje z oceno, da kljub nekaterim pomankljivostim Luhmannovega pristopa ni mogoče zavreči njegovih bazičnih teoretskih konceptov, temveč jih je treba razvijati naprej.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: funkcionalna družbena diferenciacija, moderna družba, integracija, evolucija, družbeno načrtovanje

Luhmann's social systems theory has been one of the most controversial sociological concepts of the last decades of the Twentieth Century. It has caused many discussions, being both praised and criticised, which is – due to his radically innovative and original approach – hardly surprising.

The aim of this article is definitely not to try to provide an overall assessment of Luhmann's theory. Moreover, there will not be much about the strengths of Luhmann's theory, such as its interdisciplinary approach, internal coherence, originality, the fact that it is able to go beyond some utopias of societal engineering and beyond some old dilemmas, e. g. between structure and action, between consensus and conflict and so on.

Instead, the purpose of this article is to stress some problems which derive from Luhmann's understanding of modern societies. Such approach – which concentrates on some weaknesses – may be more productive than an overall assessment, because it can offer some of the possible clues, where and how Luhmann's theory can be improved. Moreover, none of the problems, which will be chosen, is marginal, since they are in fact derived from the core of his theory. It will also be shown that they are mutually related and that it is possible to overcome them without rejecting the basic concepts of Luhmann's theory.

1. Differentiation of the Modern Society

Luhmann was one of the few sociologists who really took the globalisation seriously – already when defining the unit of sociological analysis. His main unit of analysis is no longer – neither explicitly nor implicitly – a political community, usually organised as a nation state, but the single world society, defined as a system of *all* communication (see e.g. Luhmann 1990; 1991).

One of the central ideas of Luhmann's theory is that modern society is differentiated into various self-referential functional subsystems which operate according to their own particular logic without being subordinated to any central unit. They are interdependent and open for exchange with each other, but at the same time operationally closed, which means that only they can (re)produce their own constitutive elements and, consequently, (re)produce themselves (see e.g. Adam 1996; Luhmann 1990; 1995). Durkheim's (1933) division of labour, Weber's (1987; Kokot 1991) autonomous life orders, Spencer's (1976-96) and Parsons' (1966; 1977 etc.) functional differentiation are thus brought to radical but logical conclusion, presented in a very consistent and coherent way. Differentiation thus actually becomes the central concept and even the basis for any kind of unity, since the unity of any (sub)system can only be based on its *difference* from its environments.

It may be asked, however, whether this picture of a functionally differentiated society is actually valid. Can the modern society be described and understood on the basis of the *functional* differentiation? In fact, Luhmann (1990) discusses two other types of differentiation: segmentary and stratificational, but they are considered as being quite marginal – when compared to the functional differentiation – or even placed somewhere to the past (see also Kiss 1990).

Before proceeding, these concepts should be briefly clarified. The concept of segmental divisions has been already used by Durkheim in his discussion on mechanical solidarity. Luhmann does not provide a very clear definition for a segmentary differentiation. It may be argued, however, that it can only be properly defined as a division into relatively similar and relatively self-sufficient (in comparison with functional differentiation) units without hierarchical relations (in comparison with stratificational differentiation) between each other. According to this definition there is no need to limit, as it is often implicitly done, the segmentary divisions to the units with ascribed membership and even some (seemingly) “primordial” units, such as families, ethnic groups, races or nations. Collectivities with “achieved” membership, such as stock-companies or political parties are segmentary differentiated from each other as well. For example, the differentiation between two political parties in the opposition is not a functional one, since they perform the same function for the political system as a whole, namely controlling the government, and there is no particular division of labour between them. Of course, pressure groups, political parties and corporations do perform important *functions* but this does not mean that they are functionally differentiated from each other. If one does not want to invent new terms, this is a clear example of segmentary differentiation. Such *segmentary* divisions are an inevitable precondition for the

phenomena very characteristic for a modern society, such as pluralism, autonomy of various elites from each other (on this topic see e. g. Etzioni-Halevy 1993), and market economy.

Stratificational differentiation is also not discussed in details in Luhmann's writings, but it is quite clear that it means *hierarchical* relations between units. It should be clearly distinguished from inequality as such. The sole fact that one unit has more resources than the other (i.e. inequality) is not particularly interesting for a systems theory if it has no consequences for its relations with other units. Of course, some inequalities, such as the status ones, may strongly influence the relations between different segmentary units, but they do not necessarily change their segmentary relation into a stratificational one. One may only speak on stratificational differentiation between unit A and unit B when unit A has greater *capacity of control and steering* of the functioning of unit B than B has in relation to A and when each of the two units also has its specific internal logic, which means that it is differentiated from the other and is not a part of it. Consequently, what constitutes the stratificational differentiation is not inequality between units as such, but the *cybernetic* relation between them. This is – at least implicitly – also taken into account by the major conflict theories, from Marx to Dahrendorf, which usually tend to stress the unequal division of resources. For Marxists, for example, inequalities are only relevant as far as they produce cybernetic relationships, i. e. between the *ruling* and the *ruled* class.

Functional differentiation does not need much further clarification. It may be simply defined as a differentiation into various units which complement each other, because each of them perform only a part of the functions required for a certain task (e. g. survival).

Obviously these three kinds of differentiation should only be understood as (Weberian) ideal types. In reality several combinations are possible. For instance, colonialism may produce stratificational relations between segmentary units; segmentary differentiation between political parties may also become a functional one, when one party is in power and the other in opposition; communist regimes created stratificational relations between politics and other functional subsystems of the society,¹ etc.

Generally, the idea of the dominance of the functional differentiation in modern societies advocated by Luhmann is quite persuasive; it certainly seems to be more valid than some other views, such as the ones of many Marxists or radical feminists, which are only able to see the *hierarchical* aspects of modern society. Understanding differences and role divisions as *mostly or even necessary* leading to hierarchies is an oversimplified view, unable to present a valid picture of a modern society. Looking at (post)modern political divisions, for instance, may reveal that they have moved from the traditional class (stratificational) issues to the new ones, which are more and more often connected to the relations between various *functional* subsystems: economy vs. political public (e. g. ecological issues), science vs. economy (e. g. financing and application of research), ethics vs. science (e. g. genetic engineering), etc. Stressing the functional differentiation also helps one to go beyond disputes, for instance, whether a consumer is “the king” with the almost unlimited right to choose or just a victim of manipulation by corporations’

advertising. Why should there necessary be a hierarchical relation and not mostly a functional one? Taking the latter into account may lead one to the much more productive explanations.

Such illustrations speak in favour of Luhmann's emphasis on functional differentiation. However, even if relative predominance of functional differentiation in modern society is accepted, the other two types should not be ignored or only marginally mentioned. Mentioning them only marginally is questionable because of the following:

1. It should be remembered that Luhmann (1990; 1991) has actually discussed *the world society* as a world-wide system of all communication, not only some of its parts, once called by Parsons (1966) "the system of modern societies". It would be hard to find the predominance of functional differentiation, for example, in contemporary Afghanistan or the People's Republic of Korea. Stratificational and segmentary divisions, often based on religion or ideology, seem to be much more important in such societies.
2. One may object the above statement arguing that these are nothing but some pre-modern (anti-modern) forms which are unable to survive in the long run in a modern globalising world. This objection is at least questionable, since there may also be trends which contradict globalisation and modernisation. B. Barber, for instance, confronts the trend of globalisation "McWorld" with the one of tribalisation "Jihad" (Holton 1998). It seems hard to tell much about the latter from the aspect of Luhmann's systems theory.
3. If, however, the above objection was accepted it may be argued that a picture of functionally differentiated society presented by Luhmann is closer to a pure type of modern society in Weberian sense, than to an actual description of an empirical situation. Luhmann, however, does not seem to discuss ideal types, but actual society.
4. Luhmann's theory is a clear example of the grand theory. Some of its fundamental principles are developed from some quite universal and interdisciplinary principles and as such it might function as a general theory of society. Unfortunately, in this respect Luhmann does not seem to be enough ambitious. From describing the general principles, he almost always implicitly or explicitly turns exclusively to the characteristics of modern societies without any attempt of systematic consideration of pre-modern societies. Using Luhmann's version of systems theory to study pre-modern societies might have been extremely interesting after Parsons' (1966) *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives* or Eisenstadt's (1963) *Political Systems of Empires* as examples of applications of older versions of systems theory to some historical cases. The conceptual apparatus of the latter authors, however, was designed to suit very well both modern and pre-modern societies and produce some interesting comparisons. Luhmann's historical analyses on the other hand are much more brief and fragmental and his conceptual apparatus would probably still need some adjustments and considerations before it could be applied to pre-modern societies.² Several legitimate questions may be asked, such as: Are partially differentiated functional units of pre-modern societies self-referential, if stratificational differentiation is a predominant one? What are the basic principles,

according to which various segmentary units are differentiated? Can one insist on strict differentiation between a psychic system and a social system if the former is very strongly incorporated in a single segmentary social unit?

5. Moreover, there are in fact many empirical phenomena *in* modern societies, which cannot be explained without admitting that stratificational and segmentary differentiation do not only play a supplementary role to the functional differentiation or are the remnants of the past, but can – in some cases – even play a major role. Some of their aspects should be briefly mentioned.

Luhmann's claim that the pattern of differentiation of the modern society is a functional and not a stratificational one can be accepted, if one – as it was already stressed – clearly distinguishes stratificational differentiation from social inequality. Modern society as a whole certainly cannot be perceived as a hierarchy, where all or almost all units would be clearly subordinated to the one or few units with the capacity of overall control. This is definitely prevented by the extreme level of complexity in the modern society. Luhmann's emphasis on the acentric nature of the society can be even more justifiable when the fact that his main unit of analysis is *the world society* is taken into account. Nevertheless, Luhmann's analysis is almost exclusively limited to the macro level, namely to the society as a whole and its functional sub-systems and when one moves to the mezzo and micro levels complexity decreases and systems become more likely or even inevitably differentiated in a much more stratified way. The units of the highly acentric markets and networks are often organisations, organised in a hierarchical way, though their hierarchies may have become less rigid in the age of post-fordism. The elements from which an acentric society is built may sometimes be quite centralised and hierarchical. Despite the assumption that the (autopoietic) system constitutes its own elements and not vice versa (see e. g. Luhmann 1995) the micro and mezzo levels which may provide the "material" for such elements are no less important. System's autopoiesis is not determined, but it is clearly *limited* by the available "material". Consequently, it may be productive for the systems theory to turn more attention to the micro (e. g. groups) and mezzo level (e. g. institutions), which it should be able to explain as well. Turning to them would also lead to a greater emphasis on stratificational differentiation.

Moreover, there are some important examples of segmentary differentiation in modern societies which in fact *enable* the functioning of functional subsystems. Market economy, for instance, requires the segmental differentiation between enterprises. If differentiation between them included *only the functional* division of labour, market system would be replaced by the system of monopolies, similar, for instance to a pre-capitalist gild system. Market presupposes competition and competition usually presupposes *incomplete* division of labour, namely that some units perform the same tasks as some other units, which means that they are differentiated from each other in a segmental, not in a functional way.³ This is also the case in the political subsystem which again requires certain competition between interest groups and between political parties. The functionally differentiated society also presupposes functional differentiation of elites as well as their segmentary differentiation (on the importance of elite autonomy

see e. g. Etzioni-Halevy 1993; Adam 1999). The lack of the latter, especially in the more “central”⁴ functional subsystems, such as politics and economy, may disrupt certain fragile balances and thus undermine the normal functional differentiation of the system as a whole. Consequently, some aspects of segmental differentiation are necessary for the maintenance of functional differentiation. Of course, this should not be understood as a one-way causal link. The reverse is the case as well, namely the functional differentiation may enable some types of segmentary differentiation.

Moreover, it may be argued that some other kinds of segmental differentiation are also important for modern societies though they may often seem to be more ascribed than achieved and more primordial than modern. For example, the functional differentiation of the kinship system from other functional subsystems has been closely related to the greater segmental differentiation between nuclear families.

Luhmann himself mentions that “only the political subsystem continues to use such [territorial instead of functional] frontiers, because segmentation into ‘states’ appears to be the best way to optimise its own function” (Luhmann 1990: 178). However, Luhmann provides no answer *why* segmentary differentiation is the best way to optimise its own function. It may be argued that the lack of an answer is not a coincidence, since the answer would very likely include the concept of political community as an important source of legitimisation of political action. And the concept of community – integrated, by its segmentary differentiation from the other communities – is the one that is very strictly avoided by Luhmann’s theory.⁵ This leads one to the problem of integration which is the next one to be discussed.

2. Community and Integration

Parsons has placed *the societal community* to the core of his concept of society. No society was seen to be able to exist without the integration potential of its community. Luhmann has not used these concepts any more. This can be explained by the fact that Luhmann used both (1) different systemic paradigm and (2) different concept of society. According to Luhmann’s classification the development of systems theory consists of three paradigms: the first defines the system as a relative unity of various interconnected elements and therefore emphasises problems like integration, the second defines the system in relation to its environment and thus stresses the problems of border maintenance, interchange or openness/closure, while the third defines the system in terms of its self-referential operations (see: Luhmann 1995). Parsons’ systems theory would belong to the first paradigm, combined with the second one. If, on the other hand, the third paradigm is consistently followed, as in the case of Luhmann, the *basic* precondition for the system’s reproduction is no longer based on its ability to integrate its elements, but on its ability to reproduce itself from its specific self-referential operations. This is also linked to the Luhmann’s concept of society which is no longer defined as being organised around a particular community but as an all-encompassing (world) system of communication. The reproduction of the society is thus no longer based on its ability to integrate its various elements (sub-systems, institutions, actors-

in-roles etc.), but on its ability to produce communication from the previous communication. Various subsystems of such society, on the other hand, reproduce themselves by constantly reproducing particular types of communication, which are – in the case of functional sub-systems – based on particular symbolically generalised media, such as money, power, law, truth, love, etc⁶ (see Luhmann 1990; 1990a etc.).

Nevertheless, the problem of integration still cannot be avoided. Functional sub-systems are operationally closed by their specific operations based on their specific media, but on the other hand they “need” each other, since they are functionally interdependent. Luhmann's answer is that they are able to observe themselves in their environments, they are not *only* self-referential, but also opened for references from their environments (i. e. other subsystems). Moreover, certain long-term links based on interdependence – structural coupling – may be formed between different functional subsystems (see e.g.: Luhmann 1995: 222). It is also possible to “translate” communication of one subsystem to the communication of another, for instance by translating money to power and vice versa, power to law and vice versa etc. Such translations are, of course, very complex and contingent processes, since they depend on the internal principles of all subsystems, which produce the media involved in such “translation” (for instance, on translation of power into money and law see Luhmann 1990a).

However, it is questionable, whether these are the only relevant solutions to the problem of integration in modern societies. How to explain the persisting segmental differentiation of the world political subsystem into regional organisations, national, regional and local governments? A general answer may be that territorial divisions produce relatively smaller units with smaller complexity, which make it easier for the units of the political subsystem to formulate and achieve certain collective goals. Nevertheless, how such territorial divisions are drawn is hardly a pure coincidence. Usually – but certainly not always – they are related to the existence of certain *communities*, although in many cases it is not clear which developed first: the borders of political organisation or the borders of political community.⁷

Translating this to a language closer to Luhmann's theory, communities can be understood as segmentary subsystems of the wider social system. The reproduction of a community is based on the ongoing communication of the difference from other communities of the similar kind. In the case of territorial communities this difference cannot be based on functionally specific media but on communicating local, regional, ethnical, national etc. specifics of the community. Just like the functional subsystems, segmentary communities are by definition less complex than their environments, because less options are possible in a community than in the wider social world. Thus, differentiation into segmentary communities can be understood as an important reduction of complexity, which may be of extreme importance for the functioning of the political subsystem. The revival of ethnic and national issues in the last decades may show the new complexity arising from the inconsistencies between segmental divisions of political organisation and segmental divisions between certain (“imagined” to use B. Anderson's concept) communities (on contemporary relevance of nation-based communities see e.g. Holton 1998; Smith 1995). Phenomena like secessions and dissolution of empires

and federations may contribute to – sometimes even necessary – reduction of complexity within the new emerging units, but may also be considered by some other units as an (unfavourable) emergence of new complexity within the world society.

From the aspect of a functional subsystem, segmentary territorial communities are considered a part of its environment, while from the aspect of a territorial community parts of functional subsystems may be understood as a kind of internal environment – as national economy, national politics, national health system, etc. This is nothing more but a matter of perspective.

There are no reliable signs neither of the end of the segmentary differentiation of political subsystem nor of the end of its links to certain communities (even if EU is considered as a new super-state, which it is not, it is still a segmentary unit, related to a certain “imagined” community, organised around European culture and values). Nevertheless, this does not necessarily contradict globalisation and the prevailing functional differentiation. Many new cases of segmentary differentiation emerge in the context of globalisation.⁸ Moreover, the combination of both types of differentiation may have important integration consequences. The existence of segmentary communities may help the political subsystem to intervene in co-ordination problems between parts of various functional subsystems. On the other hand the global nature of the latter contributes to the integration between various communities. It is especially the issue of co-ordination and integration between various subsystems which may remind one how important it is to take into account the existence of both, functional and segmentary units.

3. Planning in modern society

“Evolution is all that is needed for survival,” was argued by Luhmann (1995: 477), when speaking about the present and the future of modern society. At a first glance it may seem that he ignores planning because his concept excludes the traditional subject/object division and the concept of social actor as the one who is capable of planning his or her actions. Luhmann’s social system no longer consists of actors’ actions as in the case of Parsons, but of self-referentially reproducing communication events. However, claiming that Luhmann ignores the issue of planning because he ignores (human) actors is at least questionable.⁹

In fact, according to Luhmann’s theory two types of systems, psychic and social, which can both observe themselves and their environment and operate on the basis of meaning, may be quite capable of what “classical” actors are supposed to do – planning within their consciousness (psychic systems) or communication (social systems). The ability of planning in the social system is thus not ignored and Luhmann (1995: 199) in fact argued that “the organisation of the collective capacity for action must be viewed as one of the most important early evolutionary achievements of social systems, because it can decisively improve the external relationship of these systems by internal restrictions.”

On the other hand, “no society can be planned” (Luhmann 1990: 179). According to Luhmann, societal evolution – by definition – cannot be planned and planning in the

modern society on the macro level can *never* achieve its actual goals. First, one cannot create a description of a social system, which would be as complex as this system itself. Descriptions of social systems are inevitably less complex than social systems themselves, which means that planning can only deal with approximations of what is supposed to be planned. However, even if the planner was able to describe the entire complexity of the society, the existence of its description *within* the society would further increase societal complexity, making planning even more difficult. According to Luhmann there is much planning in modern society at the macro level, but it mostly results in unintended consequences, increasing complexity and quicker evolution.

The major limits of planning in Luhmann's theory, based on his concept of society differentiated into complex self-referential systems, can be summarised as follows:

1. There are limits of possible perception and knowledge of the planner.
2. There are limits of implementation of plans, when confronted with different internal logic of different systems.
3. Planning itself increases complexity, which again influences the limits mentioned under 1 and 2.

This reasoning may be acceptable, but Luhmann's conclusions, namely the general inability of planning at the macro level to fulfil its aims, is questionable. Its practical consequence would be an incrementalist policy or "muddling through" as Lindblom would argue. It seems that when Luhmann rejects some relatively naive concepts of rational steering of the society, such as Habermas' (1987) communicative rationality, he may be approaching the opposite extreme, which leads one to great difficulties. It may be much to risky, for instance, to leave the ecological consequences of the market economy to the wisdom of the evolution. From the aspect of the contemporary society, there may simply not be enough time and resources to wait for the selections of the "proper" variations.

It may be more productive to accept the limits of planing stressed by Luhmann, but also to try to find some more balanced ways of how society can use its planning ability which should still be considered as an important evolutionary achievement. The answers may be based on the following:

1. Being aware of both extreme societal complexity and extreme risks caused by the (evolutionary) spontaneity, Etzioni (1968: 282ff) suggests a more balanced concept called the mixed scanning. This means that societal steering may be based on rational planning only in a few most strategic issues, which require a detailed consideration and strong consensus, and approach incrementalism in everyday issues.
2. Because of the lack of knowledge and implementation ability of a single planner, central and hierarchical forms of planning may be replaced by more acentric ones, based on negotiation networks which consists of representatives of various units with various internal logics. This idea is well described in the concept of contextual steering developed by Helmut Willke and it also shows how Luhmann's theory can be upgraded (see: Willke 1995; 1996).
3. Planning may be relatively easier when limited to the smaller units (functionally,

segmentary or stratificationally) differentiated from the larger whole, though no unit can be considered as isolated in a globalising world society. Empirically, the vast majority planning is still – more or less successfully – performed within differentiated parts of the world society. This means that differentiation makes successful planning within the emerging units less improbable. Consequently, the segmentary differentiation into various communities as an important example reduction of complexity, mentioned above, may also be relevant here.

From this short consideration of some aspects of Luhmann's theory, concerning differentiation, integration, and planning, one certainly cannot conclude that the theory does not provide correct answers and should therefore be rejected. On the contrary, the weaknesses which have been revealed may call for the further consideration and wider application of some concepts, especially the segmentary differentiation and the ability of planning. Thus, some concepts which already exist in Luhmann's theory may be used to – at least partially – overcome its weaknesses.

Notes

1. For more detailed discussion about the latter see e. g. Makarovič 1996.
2. Presentation of some brief Luhmann's remarks on historical development of the society can be found for instance in Kiss 1990; Luhmann 1989; 1990 etc.
3. To a limited extent certain competition is also possible between functionally differentiated units when all of them require the same resources for their respective operations (e. g. money). The effects of such competition, however, are much different. Because of functional interdependence application of the concepts of selection and "survival of the fittest" to the functional units may produce harmful or even destructive effects for the system as a whole and also for the units which are "winning" in the selection.
4. "Central" here does not presuppose hierarchy, but should be understood as having relatively more links to the other societal subsystems.
5. This is also one of the main points of Habermas' critique which claims that Luhmann ignores the social integration (see e.g. Habermas 1987). This critique may be at least partially acceptable, though it may be questionable whether the strict division between system and social integration (system vs. life-world) is very productive.
6. It is interesting that media normally related to community and integration, such as *influence*, are ignored. This makes Luhmann's discussion of the political subsystem much less precise than the one of Talcott Parsons, or probably even inaccurate, since he is not able to distinguish between *power* and *influence* (see: Luhmann 1990b: 46ff; Parsons 1977: 210).
7. The link between segmentary units of political subsystem and communities is also clearly expressed in Etzioni's concept of political community (see: Etzioni 1965: 4).
8. Slovenia, for instance, declared independence in order to open its path to the European integration in a cultural and institutional way, while movements for independence of Kosovo from FRY have also searched for their allies in the new global world order (for some more examples of links between nationalism and globalisation see also: Holton 1998: 158ff)
9. On similar criticisms see e.g. Škerlep 1996.

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