

**Between Systems Theory and Neo-Institutionalism
Studying Regional Organization
in World Society**

Mathias Albert/Lena Hilkermeier

Paper for presentation at the 2001 Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, Anaheim, CA, 18-21 August

**PRELIMINARY DRAFT; PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE OR CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION;
COMMENTS ARE MOST WELCOME**

Contact:¹

Mathias Albert
Faculty of Sociology
University of Bielefeld
Postfach 100131
33501 Bielefeld
Germany
Tel.: +49-521-106-3999
Email: mathias.albert@uni-bielefeld.de

Lena Hilkermeier
Institute of Political Science
Darmstadt University of Technology
Residenzschloss
64283 Darmstadt
Germany
Tel.: +49-6151-16-5243
Email: hilkermeier@pg.tu-darmstadt.de

PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE OR CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION

¹ In order to prevent misunderstandings stemming from these addresses: Hilkermeier is the sociologist, Albert the political scientist in the pair.

1. Theorizing world society

While the concept of “world society” certainly entails the promise to provide a conceptually rich background for the study of various processes of global and local social change, the precise meaning attributed to the term still vary widely. This observation even pertains to concepts of world society which deliberately conceive of it as being different from the model of territorially bound and/or normatively integrated “societies”. A number of such concepts are currently in use.

The modern systems theory of society as developed by Niklas Luhmann conceives of world society as the highest-order social system possible; there is no society outside world society. It is constituted by and includes all communication. However, it is not an *integrated* society; rather it achieves its unity solely through its internal differentiation. This differentiation is primarily functional. The function systems of world society (like politics, law, art, economy etc.) are communicatively constituted, causally open, yet operationally closed systems, i.e. they process communication according to their own basal operational code (e.g. legal/illegal; monetary value; in overview: Luhmann 1997; Stichweh 2000), utilizing symbolically generalized media of communication (e.g. money, power, etc.). Internally, the political and legal systems of world society are primarily differentiated territorially. The state in this context forms the primary mode of the political and legal systems’ self-description (Luhmann, 2000a: 189ff)

In contrast to modern systems theory, another sociological approach in which the notion of “world society” features prominently, the neo-institutionalism of the so-called “Stanford School”, applies a notion of world society equally broad in analytical terms, yet much less concretely specified. The neo-institutionalist approach as prominently advanced by John Meyer and colleagues observes that there is some “world culture”, understood as a number of “models of and assumptions about reality that underlay action, organization, and discourse” (Thomas, in preparation, no p.; Meyer et al., 1997). Thus, although may be no world state (but see Shaw, 2000) and only imperfect forms of “global governance”, there is some culturally and associational world authority (constituting a “world polity”), which is however not centralized or homogenous, but rather highly heterogeneous. One prominent manifestation of this world polity is the form of the nation-state itself, which is constructed through world cultural scripts. Its embeddedness in a world culture leads to the emergence of *similar* organizational forms through processes of isomorphism. “World society” in this case seems to form some kind of abstract background notion, creating a reference for what actually includes all of the institutions, organizational forms and the cultural and associational processes described.

While the *sociological*, systems-theoretical as well as neo-institutionalist notions of world society present “top-down” approaches to the empirical study of specific structures and forms in the sense that *ab initio* they conceive of the state, international organizations, etc. in the context of their embeddedness in world society, concepts in the field of *political science/international relations* mostly form bottom-up approaches in that they see world society as *emerging* through qualitative transformations of an “international system” or an “international society” and the actors, organizations and institutions within them (see, for example: Albert et al. 2000; Buzan/Little 2000).

While all of the approaches mentioned arguably have something important to add to the understanding of global processes both in a diachronic as well as in a synchronic perspective, going beyond the analyses offered by more “traditional” perspectives of globalization, all of them exhibit analytical weaknesses too. Thus, for example, systems theory seems to have difficulties in accounting for a functional

orientation of politics on a global/international level; neo-institutionalism might be criticized for describing a rationalizing process on a world-wide scale, yet leaving the notion of "society" substantially quite empty in the end; conceptualizations of world society from an international relations perspective might be suspected of still being biased if not by a (traditional-realist) state-centric perspective, then at least by a latent remaining "methodological nationalism". Under this condition, it is highly remarkable that not only is there very little substantial dialogue between the main proponents of these approaches themselves, but also no literature trying to probe into overlaps as well as disjunctions between them and theoretical cross-fertilizations ensuing therefrom. Of course, an analytical obstacle of no small proportions arguably lies in the way of such a di- or tri- dialogue, namely that the explicit or implicit theories of society inherent in these approaches diverge substantially, possibly to the point of being incommensurable with each other. However, theoretical incommensurability must not lead to an outright abandoning of attempts to achieve an analytic cross-fertilization between the divergent approaches. If one does operate on the grounds of viewing theoretical pluralism as forming a helpful tool for empirical research as well as for further theory development (see, e.g. Albert/Kratochwil 2001), then this should be reason enough for trying to utilize all the theoretical perspectives mentioned in trying to understand global social processes and structural change. In doing so, then, an identification of theoretical weaknesses and possible improvements within the various theories is more than an intended side-effect.

In the present paper, we do not want to begin the di-/tri- dialogue between various modes of conceiving world society by dwelling on highly abstract points regarding the inner logic of the different theories. Rather, we want to initiate the di-/tri- dialogue by focussing on a specific research question regarding an important structural feature of contemporary world society, namely the remarkable proliferation of regional international governmental organizations in the 20th century. In our view, assessing this phenomenon as well as trying to devise a proper research design for studying it in a conceptually guided fashion provides an apt example not only for elucidating the perspectives offered by the approaches mentioned, but also for identifying their individual and/or collective strengths and weaknesses. For pragmatic reasons, we will in the following focus on modern systems theory and neo-institutionalism as decidedly *sociological* conceptualizations of world society, leaving a systematic inclusion of political science conceptualizations of world society to a later expansion point.

Starting from the assumption that given its strong research record regarding the proliferation of state organizations or INGOs in world society (see Thomas et al. 1987, Boli/Thomas 1999), a neo-institutionalist approach prima facie offers a most promising research design for studying the process of regional organization. Yet, it is the main argument of this paper that devising an appropriate research design forces open some fundamental theoretical issues regarding some central concepts of the neo-institutionalist agenda which might fruitfully be developed by incorporating some insights from modern systems theory. In broad theoretical terms, we argue that in order to understand the emerging relationship between nation-state and regional organizational forms within world society, it is necessary to reflect on the parameters which circumscribe change within world society under the condition of its *functional differentiation*, and thus possibly to relax some of neo-institutionalism's agenda as a theory of societal *modernization*.

Regarding the phenomenon to be studied itself, the current state of undertheorization characteristic for studies of regionalisation/regional organization seems to leave ample room for speculation: Can the

proliferation and intensification of regional organization be read as a reassertion of *territorial differentiation* on a societal scale? Does regional organization simply form another layer in the world-polity, one which has simply been neglected in empirical research in the neo-institutionalist context so far? Or does the functional differentiation of world society into operationally closed systems (in the Luhmannian sense) point to a decreasing importance of organizational systems (including those expressed in the “nation-state” form) on the level of society as a whole?

Against this background, neo-institutionalist analysis provides a number of useful tools to analyze the variety of regionalising processes currently taking place, particularly offering many advantages over the agent-centered accounts (see DiMaggio, 1988) which indeed remain characteristic for the study of international organization in the field of IR. However, a neo-institutionalist account cannot neglect the very fundamental issue of how organizations are inserted into a world society understood as a social system primarily differentiated functionally. Trying to address this task, however, in our impression points to some structural limitations of the neo-institutionalist agenda, which we argue could, for the sake of empirical analysis, at least partly be redressed by systematically relating the neo-institutionalist project to a modern systems theory of society (in the Luhmannian tradition). Of course, mapping out of such a relation exceeds the possibilities of a single project, let alone paper.

Our task here is therefore more modest and limited to demonstrate more closely how such a theoretical task emerges for neo-institutionalist theory if it seeks to address an important evolutionary feature of contemporary world society, namely the proliferation and intensification of regional organization. In the following, we will thus attempt to *identify more specific questions for further theoretical work on the basis of questions which emerge in trying to sketch a research design for studying the process of regional organization in world society.*

The argument will proceed in three steps: in a first step, we will briefly elaborate on the increasing importance of forms of regional organization for understanding structural change on a global scale as well as on the need for an abstract conceptualization of regionalisation as a first step for analyzing this development. Second, we will specify some of the core concepts of neo-institutionalist analysis and their partly problematic character when put to analytical use, proposing to supplement or substitute them with some ideas taken from modern systems theory. Against this background, we argue that the study of the proliferation of regional organizations can focus on isomorphisms between regional organizations and their environments, however on the basis of systems-theoretically modified understanding of the very concepts of “organization” and “system-environment relation”. We will thirdly close with some thoughts on the possibilities and difficulties to operationalize a research design.

Given its scope, this paper is of a primarily explorative nature, both on a disciplinary as well as on a time scale. It is explorative in disciplinary terms, since it ventures onto grounds on which different strands of contemporary sociological – modern systems theory and neo-institutionalism – and IR theorizing come together; strands, for which the possibilities for talking to each other might have been probed individually,² but not in a dialogical fashion. The paper is also explorative timewise, since it is intended to serve as the very first entry point for discussions about conceptual issues at the beginning of a larger research undertaking.

² For neo-institutionalism and IR, see Jepperson et al., 1996; for systems theory and IR, see Albert, 1999; for systems theory and neo-institutionalism, see Hilkermeier, in preparation.

2. Regionalisation and regional organization in world society

The proliferation of functionally as well as regionally defined organizations above the level of the nation-state, both of a governmental and non-governmental kind, forms an important feature of late 19th/20th century world society. However, the jury is still out on whether the increasing density of regional organizations such as the EU, Mercosur, ASEAN etc. are to be read as emerging structural alternatives to a primary differentiation of the world polity into nation-states, or whether regional orders merely supplement a world of nation-states. While processes of regionalisation as well as the development of specific regional organization are well-documented in a vast body of literature both in the context of studies on globalization as well as in the field of area studies (see, for example, Fawcett/Hurrell, 1995; Gamble/Payne; 1996a; Hettne et al., 1999), they remain notoriously under-theorized in conceptualizations of world society and accounts of global change, in sociology as much as in the field of international relations.³

In addition, while regionalism, or, more generally, an increasing regional agglomeration of various kinds of social processes, has emerged as an important structural feature of an international or global system, what actually defines a region, and thus allows to evaluate the importance of the phenomenon remains far from being agreed upon in the relevant literature across a range of disciplines. While some see functionally described concentrations of specific transactions, such as trade or currency blocs, to be a characteristic feature of the emerging global order - variably understood as a result or as a countertrend to globalization (see Storper, 1997; Bhagwati, 1991) -, others have diagnosed a comprehensive reorientation and rearticulation of state functions towards regional reference systems - up to the emergence of so-called "region-states" (Ohmae, 1993; Hettne, 1993). In the discipline of international relations, interpretations range from accounts which ascribe only limited importance to forms of regional cooperation or organization between states, over analyses particularly of the European Union (EU), which see genuinely new forms of statehood to be emerging on a regional level, to more radically constructivist accounts, for which new forms of regionality in the international system are irreducible to geographic representations of what a "region" actually is (Joenniemi, 1997). While by no means denying the importance of addressing the variety of regionalising or region-forming processes from various theoretical angles, the assessment of the scope and quality of regionalisation on a global scale seems at first to necessitate the adoption of a broader conceptual perspective than usually adopted in the routes of inquiry just referred to above. It is for this reason that we propose to frame an understanding of regionalising processes not on top of empirically observed developments in the first place, but to account for the *uniformity* of these phenomena despite their ostensible high variation by specifying their *function* in the context of world societal evolution. In such a general sense, then, regionalisation would appear less as a development fuelled by deliberate political and economic strategies, but more as one possible form of handling complexity through differentiation within the social system of world society (see Albert/Brock, 2001; Bango, 1998). Of course, such a highly general definition of regionalisation via its function within the highest order social system possible (i.e. world society; see Luhmann, 1972, leaves open a number of basic questions regarding the exact form and im-

³ If one excludes the "old" functionalist accounts which we do here.

pact of the process. Of particular importance in this respect are the issues of whether regionalisation merely supplements or rather supplants other forms of differentiation.

This question acquires a particular urgency in relation to the territorial differentiation of the global political system. Are we witnessing the emergence of a new international political order based on regions which gradually displaces the primacy of the political system's differentiation into nation-states? Or does a coexistence of regions ("region states") and nation-states merely reflect the necessities of dealing with new complexities which emerge in and for the political system within the context of globalizing processes? In addition, and more fundamentally, is regionalisation a process to be specified only for specific function systems individually (as would be implied by a strict systems theoretical reading, or a process cutting across function systems?

We propose to approach the study of regionalisation in the context of world societal evolution in a way which is based on the general functional understanding of the process, yet opens up the possibility to address a significant part of the process empirically without having to produce answers about to underlying theories of society all too prematurely. Particularly in order to avoid the tricky question of whether regionalising processes occur only within or somehow "cut across" world society's function systems (such as politics, law, religion, economy etc.), it seems prudent not to start to study the uniformity within the variety of regionalising processes at the level of society's function systems at all, but to concentrate on one form of regionalising processes which pertains to and is played out through social systems which are not directly attributable to specific function systems in the first place, but "cut across" them.

The proliferation of regional organizations can be studied empirically without from the outset having to determine the relation of this form of regional differentiation to other forms not expressed through the formation of organizations.⁴ Theoretically, taking regional organizations as a starting point would seem to offer the advantage of pursuing the path of least resistance in that, with all due respect to other and fundamental differences, at least the very existence and importance of organizations is a fact not disputed among sociological and political science approaches which seek to conceptualize and analyze the qualities of global change. What the study of the process of regional organization offers, in other words, is a point of entry for conceptualizing the entirety of regionalising processes within world society by demonstrating how a uniformity within the variety of observed phenomena can be discerned not only on the general level of differentiation and the processing of complexity on a global level, but on the level of concrete manifestations of these differentiating processes, i.e. in this case: the emergence and evolution of regional organizations above the level of the nation-state.

Yet, on a second look, even such a seemingly simple empirical task contains a number of difficulties. First and foremost: how do we actually know something to be a regional organization when we see it, indeed, what actually qualifies as an *organization* in the first places, given the many well-known ambiguities in the concept itself? For this purpose, some conceptual deliberations are in order.

⁴ However, this move to concentrate on regional organizations as an expression of regionalisation represents not only a pragmatic move, but contains a substantial analytical argument, namely a rejection of the sharp distinction between „regionalism“ as a state project on the one hand, and „regionalisation“ as „complex articulation[s] of established institutions and rules and distinctive new patterns of social interaction between non-state actors“ (Gamble/Payne 1996b: 251).

3. What is an organization?

Neo-institutionalist arguments provide a rich vocabulary in order to observe the functioning of institutions which we seek to utilize for the understanding of organizations. Additionally contracting the theory of social systems allows us to embed neo-institutionalist arguments within a more global macro-sociological frame as well as to devise sharper layout of the analytic concepts employed. This is despite of the well-known fact, that particularly Luhmann (see 1965, 1970) uses the notions of institution and institutionalization in his early work only. He basically omits them in his later work, in which they become superfluous for his conceptualization of "organizations", which rests on the idea of the latter's' articular logic as social systems (see Kneer/Nassehi 1997).⁵ Society is no longer of a kind which is presumed in the very notion of institution, however:

"in modern society organizations [are; MA/LH] indispensable in all function systems. Exactly because a function system like science or education, economy or politics cannot be organized as a unity and concepts of unity are eroding – from education planning to state politics and to the perfect (mathematically modeled) competitive weight of economics -, organizations take over the function of disrupting interdependence" (Luhmann 1992: 98f; trans. MA/LH).

We argue that Luhmann's assumptions in the context of his theory of social systems - and particularly in relation to their individual operational logics – can lead to a sharper analytical concept regarding the embedding of organizations into their environments and thus also regarding the modes of organizations' actions in actively processing institutional demands (see on this Hasse/Krücken 1999).

Yet before we operationalize this potential, it is necessary to specify more closely the possibilities to differentiate between organizations and institutions from the neo-institutionalist point of view. We aim to, on the one hand, specify our understanding of *institutions* and their effects *within the neo-institutionalist context*, and, on the other hand, merge into this a notion of *organization* which originates in *Luhmann's (1995) theory of social systems* (and so far has attracted little attention in the neo-institutionalist context). Building on this, the following step will then thematize the relation between organization (system) and environment and ask how this relation could effect (emerging) structural similarities between regional organizations.

Institution and Institutionalization

Within the neo-institutionalist literature, there seems to be no institutionalized concept of "organization", nor a *common* usage of the notion „institution“ – and thus no agreed upon differentiation between "organization" and "institution" (see Meyer/Boli/Thomas, 1994: 10).⁶

Without attempting to solve this problem, it is nonetheless possible to say that sociological neo-institutionalism is characterized by taking an *institutional perspective on organizations* (Meyer/Rowan, 1977 speak about "institutionalized organizations" in this respect), putting an emphasis on shared values, norms, cognitive frames, symbols, myths etc. In addition, neo-institutionalist approaches can be differentiated into two forms: *one* focuses on institutionalized processes within organizations and thus understands organizations as institutions or cultural patterns *within* organizations (see, e.g., Sel-

⁵ See Luhmann, 1992, as an exception in which institutions are defined as societal relevant units and not only as formal organizations. In his treatment of German universities he coins the notion of an "organized institution".

⁶ Nonetheless, attempts, to clearly separate 'organization' and 'institution' from each other abound; see, for example, Khalil's (1995: 445) proposal: "Organizations are agents like households, firms, and states that have preferences and objectives. Institutions are formal and informal social constraints (rules, habits, constitutions, laws, conventions) which apparently reduce the total scarce resources available". In addition, Khalil employs the difference between 'ends' and 'means' for the purpose: "While ends

znick, 1949; Zucker, 1983). In contrast, the *second* approach conceptualizes institutions external to organizations separately from one another, concentrating on processes of institutionalization within organizational environments and their effects on organizations (e.g. Meyer/Rowan, 1977).

We broadly follow the second of these approaches and clearly differentiate between organizations and institutions. In order to do so, we have distilled a concept of what forms an „institution“ from the varieties of conceptual offerings (see Peters, 1999:18; Friedland/Alford, 1991:243; Scott, 1994:68; Scott, 1995:33f.),⁷ and thus define institutions as societal expectations, which can be normative, cognitive, as well as regulative (Scott 1995) and thus structure the field of possible action and the ways in which organizations meet specific expectations (similarly: Meyer/Boli/Thomas, 1994: 10; Covaleski/Dirsmith, 1988: 562).

Organization: Social systems and communication systems

The variety of definitions of organizations within organizational sociology clearly exceeds the variety of definitions of institutions within neo-institutionalist analysis (see, for example Scott, 1986; Pfeffer, 1982). We start from the assumption that in order to connect to the neo-institutionalist argument, organizations need to be conceptualized as externally open in order for them to be able to recognize and process institutionalized, resp. societal expectations, i.e. they form communicative relations with their environments. Yet we pledge for a more contourized concept of “organization“ drawing on some systems theoretical ideas.

For Luhmann, organizations constitute social systems.⁸ Social systems are communicative systems constituted by communication – and not human beings.⁹ Communication systems, in addition to living and psychic systems, are autopoietic¹⁰ systems. These system types are operationally closed, self-referential systems which have no points congruent with each other. The relation between psychic and social systems is described by using the concept of interpenetration. This means that these two types of system enable each other mutually and influence the formation of structures within the other system. Psychic and social systems are thus in a relation of *permanent structural coupling*. However, in spite of their close relationship, the interpenetrating systems remain an environment for each other.

Organizations, according to Luhmann, are systems whose boundaries are regulated via *membership*, membership being attached to specific conditions (see Luhmann, 2000b, ch. 3). Entry in and exit from the organizational system is regulated formally. Organization substitutes membership for presence (which is required in interaction systems) and ties membership to specific conditions. Organization is contingent on observations by the system according to a simplifying means-ends scheme and contin-

define the organization, means include -beside material and technological resources- paradigms and conventions, or, in short, institutions“ (Khalil, 1995: 447).

⁷ In more detail, see Hilkermeier, forthcoming.

⁸ For Luhmann, social systems are organizations, interaction systems, and society.

⁹ Units of communication are those basic elements of social systems which can not be disaggregated further. Communication consists of three operations selective performances which form the exclusive elements of communication:

1. *Information* forms the content-component of communication, represents a selection from possible other information and enters communication as information. Information is a construct of a social situation and does *not* inform about the thoughts of the psychic systems involved.
2. *A message („Mitteilung“)* characterizes the formal way in which communication is transmitted (whispering, crying, asking, orally, written etc.)
3. *Verstehen*: Verstehen "happens when a following-up communication signals that the preceding communication has been understood in a certain way " (Kneer/Nassehi, 1994: 85; trans. MA/LH).

¹⁰ *Autopoiesis* forms a specific mode of reproducing systems. Autopoietic systems reproduce the elements they consist of, using these very elements for the purpose. Communication is created through communication, a thought emerges because of a preceding thought.

gent on specific memberships. It thus allows to differentiate between its own ends and members' motivations (i.e. a decoupling between ends and motivation). The organization thus needs to balance redundancy and variety (see Luhmann 1990) according to its own criteria of rationality. Redundancy is created through decisions on decisional premises, i.e. on decisional programs (ends-oriented and conditional programs), positions, routes of communication, and persons within the organization. It couples hierarchized and sequentialized decisions in a particularly close fashion (via routes of communication/organizational technology) and thus erects a particularly high barrier for its ability to transform itself.

Of course, Luhmann's ideas about organizations can not be understood properly if decontextualized from his assumptions regarding (world) society. Society is the "comprehensive social system of all communications relating to each other" (Luhmann, 1990: 24; transl. MA/LH). Society's elementary units are not individuals, but meaningful, recursively relational communications. Societal reality is communicatively constructed. It is the encompassing system in which all communication takes place. All interaction systems and organizations are part of society (yet, society is "more" than the sum of all interaction and organizational systems). Since no communication occurs outside of society, society as a whole has no contact to its environment, it can only communicate *about* the environment. This is however not the case with interaction and organizational systems, which can communicate with their environment *in* society (since for Luhmann society is world society, the singular case is justified here). Society is characterized by an increasing functional differentiation through the emergence of function systems. What emerges is the image of a societal system which produces systems internally according to core functions, systems, which serve these functions exclusively. "Organization" is the dominating and most effective form of fulfilling functions in almost all functionally differentiated subsystems of society.

An additional important characteristic of organizations understood as social systems lies in them being the *only* type of social system which has the ability to communicate with social systems within their environment (see Luhmann, 1997, 2000b):

"This communication towards the outside presupposes autopoiesis on the basis of decisions. Internally, communication can only be produced within the recursive network of decisional activity, i.e. only as decision; otherwise it could not be recognized as [the organization's; MA/LH] own communication. Communication with the outside thus does not contradict the system's operative closure; to the contrary, it does presume it. This also explains quite well that organizations' communications are often flattened to the almost meaningless or exhibit other specifics which are often quite surprising for their environment and can hardly be understood. Organizations prefer to communicate with other organizations and often treat private persons as if they were other organizations, or: as if they were cases for caring which require particular aid and instruction" (Luhmann, 1997: 834; trans. MA/LH)

Relations between organizations and their environments

Neo-institutionalist thought attributes a significant influence on organizations to their organizational environments. However, organizational environment, in contrast to older conceptualizations, is more than a mere task environment or a stock of resources. It includes cultural systems which themselves contribute to the definition of organizational structures and their legitimization. The environments confronting organizations are usually organized themselves. This implies that organizations react to environments which are composed of organizations, which themselves react to their specific environments composed of organizations (see DiMaggio/Powell, 1991c: 65). Implied in the neo-institutionalist thematization of *adaptive processes* in such a context, is an understanding which basically defines α -

organizational environment as that which is not the organization itself. Of course, this does not preclude to address the ways in which organizations themselves exert influence on their environments, by trying, for example, to influence decisions of other organizations, enrolling the support of powerful actors etc.

Although this conceptualization can to some extent be translated into a conceptualization from the standpoint of modern systems theory, it is important to note that there is a marked difference in the overall understanding of the system-environment relation. For a theory of operatively closed, autopoietic social system, the environment can not be treated as some externally “given” object space. For organizations, organizational environments exist only *within* themselves (Luhmann, 2000b: 34ff). Organizations are recursively closed, yet irritable in relation to their environment. However, these irritations can only lead to reactions by organizations if translated into the structural conditions characteristic of these organizations.

Yet, the varying conceptualization of organization-environment-relations in neo-institutionalism and systems theory are not mutually exclusive in *analytic* terms. We thus start to build on a neo-institutionalist conceptualization in order to grasp the dynamics of organizations and organizational fields. In such a perspective, organizational fields exist only insofar as they are institutionally determined or structured. The process of institutionalization which is required for the emergence of an organizational field, contains four dimensions (following DiMaggio, 1983; DiMaggio/Powell, 1991c: 65):

1. An increasing interaction between organizations within the field
2. The emergence of inter-organizational structures of dominance and relational patterns
3. An increasing informational burden which needs to be processed by the organizations within the field, and
4. (between the members of organizations) The development of mutual recognition, the recognition of being bound into a common field, as well as the emergence of a common system of interpretation or a common ideology.

We do however supplement such a perspective on organizational fields by drawing on some of the systems theoretical conceptualizations. Thus, although an organization’s organizational field is inhabited by other organizations, organizations in relation to organizations within the organizational field can only act on the basis of the basal codes and the specific symbolically generalized communication media of society’s function systems. An organization acts in relation to its organizational field not as if it existed in an autonomous universe (or society, for that matter), but it always acts within the political system, the legal system, the economic system, and so on.

This systems theoretical supplement of the neo-institutionalist perspective on organizations leads us to a note of extreme caution when we turn to the isomorphisms which occupy a central place in the description of organizational fields within neo-institutionalist analyses: isomorphisms do not represent “direct” causal relations, but happen on the basis of organizations observing their environments on the basis of already existing internal structures and programs. This point becomes particularly relevant in relation to point (4) mentioned above, following DiMaggio/Powell (1991c): the “commonalties” are not a commonly shared description by different organizations within an organizational field, but, at most, similarities of self-descriptions (which can appear as such only to external observers). To put it differ-

ently: if one observes organizational fields and concrete mechanisms through which isomorphisms are produced, one does not, in a strict sense, observe how myths institutionalized within their societal environment are “taken up” and copied (see Hasse/Krücken, 1999: 13ff.) by organizations - just as if this were a process of incorporating something from the environment into the organization. Rather, all the organization of an organization is organized by the organization and within the organization itself - all its elements are produced within the organization on the basis of their self-description and thus an internal construction of their environment (similar: Weick, 1995). In theoretical terms, this difference makes all the difference; yet, it remains to be seen how much it has to influence our empirical analysis. For the time being, however, it seems important to memorize that the couplings between organizations and their environments - particularly including other organizations too - are only possible because of a radical, constitutive system-environment differentiation on the basis of the operative closure of organizations as autopoietic systems. Organizations do not react to (institutionalized) expectations in their environment; rather, organizations act for themselves on the basis of how they observe their environment and themselves on the basis of the fundamental difference between system and environment. It is only against this background whose effects will appear as we proceed with operationalizing a research design that we can nonetheless broadly follow the neo-institutionalist analysis of institutional isomorphism.

Institutional isomorphism

In terms of the neo-institutionalist debate, we broadly follow DiMaggio/Powell's (1991a) *analytic* distinction between coercive, mimetic and normative forms of isomorphism, then further detailing the concept by drawing on Scott's further differentiation of seven mechanisms through which the environment can influence the structural transformation of organizations.

For DiMaggio/Powell (1991a), *coercive isomorphism* results from either formal or informal pressure which is exerted by organizations on other, dependent organizations, or through culturally conditioned expectations towards the organization. The extent of structural modification resulting therefrom thus should correlate with the degree of its dependence from a centrally administered resource (cf. also Scott, 1995). It is particularly the legal environment (contract law, taxation law, etc.) which effects a similarity of organizations in a structural as well as in a processual dimension and thus simultaneously limits the variety of organizational forms (Powell, 1991: 188). Organizations thus become more and more organized by the rituals of conformity in relation to rules which are institutionalized and legitimized in their environments. This also implies that, for coercive isomorphisms to unfold, coercion must not exclusively be of a direct and/or explicit kind.

In contrast to coercive isomorphism, mimetic isomorphism results from organizations orienting themselves towards the structures and processes of other organizations, particularly focusing on and copying those which occupy a central position within their organizational field and which are observed as successful as well as legitimate. Imitation of organizations by organizations is particularly driven by the level of insecurity (regarding organizational aims, the environment, the relation between means and ends prevailing in organizations; cf. March/Olsen, 1976). Under such conditions, organizations seek solutions which promise to solve their problems with a minimum of effort (cf. Galaskiewicz/Wassermann, 1989). Mimetic isomorphism seems to be particularly strong when it comes

to explain the (possibly growing) degree of homogeneity between organizations. After all, the variety of organizational forms and thus the organizational “catalogue” to select from is limited. In addition, the activity of consulting agencies presumably fosters the spread of similar organizational forms

In trying to understand mechanisms of mimetic isomorphism, the issue of how organizations *identify* the organizations to be imitated in the first place assumes a central place. Particularly, by which criteria and through which processes do organizations determine not only the appropriate organizations to be imitated, but the boundaries of their organizational field in the first place? Haveman (1993) argues that organizations are likely to imitate organizations within their own “population”, i.e., for example, organizations within the same industrial sector. Within this part of the organizational field, organizations are then likely to preferably imitate organizations of similar size and/or those which are deemed as more successful.

Abbott (1988) identifies an increasing professionalization as the prime source for *normative isomorphism*. “Professionalization” in this respect refers to the establishment of norms guiding accepted modes, conditions, methods, and techniques of work, contributing to the creation of a specific professional “ethos”, if not a shared identity among the members of a profession (cf. Larson, 1977). The legitimization of professions through required, standardized qualifications contributes to the creation of a common cognitive basis perceived as legitimate. Through such a “standardization” of professional requirements and behavior, differences which exist between organizations are gradually leveled out. This effect occurs to varying degrees within different organizational fields, yet, according to DiMaggio/Powell (1991c), is most pronounced the more individual organizations rely on academic grades as a criterion for selecting personnel, and the more that the personnel is organized in professional organizations. Some organizations acquire a central role within an organizational field in that they not only form models for other organizations, but rather also become the main suppliers of people taking up core positions within professional organizations (see Useem, 1979).

While it is important to bear in mind that these three forms of isomorphism can only be separated analytically, one should also note that the effect of isomorphic mechanisms is *not* necessarily a reliable indicator for the degree to which these mechanisms indeed do take place. Isomorphism between organizations and their environment does not necessarily lead to an increased organizational efficiency (DiMaggio/Powell, 1991c: 73). Quite the contrary might in fact be the case, pointing directly to the fact that isomorphisms must not be seen as a 1:1 introductions of externally successful models into organizations, but as processes entirely contingent upon the way in which an organization utilizes such models on grounds of its own structure and specific decision programs. However, before further reflecting on the analytic consequences of these observations, it seems worthwhile to take into account further differentiations regarding the analysis of institutional isomorphism which are offered by the neo-institutionalist literature. While DiMaggio/Powell describe three broad forms of isomorphism, Scott (1987, 1991) more specifically identifies seven causal mechanisms through which the organizational environment can exert a causal influence on the structural development of organizations. Such a clearer specification seems to be necessary given the fact that „[W]hile all institutional theorists assert that such effects [of environments on organizations; MA/LH] occur, a review of the current research suggests that there exists little agreement among them as to how and why and where – in what part of

the structure –such changes occur“ (Scott 1991: 174). In seeking to redress this problem, Scott (1987, 1991) differentiates between seven mechanisms of isomorphism:

1. *The imposition of organizational structures* can be seen as a form of coercive isomorphism. However, this form of isomorphism needs to be differentiated further to take into account the difference between an imposition occurring by means of authority versus imposition occurring by means of coercive power. While the former form of imposition can arguably be expected to be met with less resistance and occur more rapidly than the latter (Tolbert/Zucker, 1983), structural changes resulting therefrom could also be expected to be associated with higher levels of compliance. However, all organizational changes which can be traced back to “impositions” from the outside carry the danger of evoking resistance on the side of the transforming organization, possibly leading to highly superficial couplings between an organization’s formal structure and the structure of its activities.
2. *Authorization* contributes to normative isomorphism. It must be distinguished from mechanisms of authorization in that the organization *voluntarily* orients its structure towards another organization. As already hinted at in the description of normative isomorphism above, DiMaggio/Powell find this kind of mechanism most likely to occur in professional sectors.¹¹ In contrast to the imposition of organizational structures, authorization as a form of normative isomorphism requires that the organization perceives the organization towards which it seeks to orient itself as legitimate.
3. Isomorphism can also occur through *inducement*. Here, (actors in the) environment induce initiatives for structural change within the organization, for example by specifying certain conditions for the receipt of financial support. In particular, inducement is used if neither effective coercion can be applied, nor a normative model is readily available. Nonetheless, given the often fleeting character of particular financial inducements (dependence on budgets, program cycles etc.), structural shifts prompted by external inducements may legitimately be anticipated to be of a less permanent character than isomorphisms effected by other mechanisms.
4. *Acquisition* as a kind of mechanism leading to a cognitive-mimetic isomorphism is based on the voluntary adoption of structural models by organizational decision-makers. It may also lead to a normative isomorphism if the models chosen are “taken for granted” ones. Being the mechanism mostly focussed upon in empirical studies, acquisition arguably leads to stable structural change within organizations, given that it rests on voluntary and deliberate decisions taken within the organization.
5. A normative isomorphism through a mechanism of operating on the basis of “taken for granted” models is referred to as *imprinting* if organizational structures have been incorporated since the organization’s founding and are simply continued unreflectedly (Scott, 1995: 115; cf. also Stinchcombe, 1965). This kind of mechanism in particular highlights the non-exclusive character of the various mechanisms described. Rather, it adds an important historical dimension to the analysis by referring to prominent organizational models at the time of an organization’s inception (at which time the organizational form may have been introduced voluntarily or through coercion etc.).
6. *Incorporation* refers to a mechanism through which an organization comes to mirror its organizational environment’s complexity within itself, without this necessarily being attributable to any kind

¹¹ Conceptually, it serves to connect with older treatments of authority norms (cf. Dornbusch/Scott, 1975: 56-63).

of (voluntary or forced) decision by the organization itself. Organizational change is thus driven by changes within the organizational field (cf. March, 1981; March/Olsen, 1984). This mechanism directly refers back to Selznick's account of institutionalization as a process of instilling values: "In what is perhaps its most significant meaning, 'to institutionalize' is to *infuse with value* beyond the technical requirements of the task at hand" (Selznick, 1957: 17). Institutionalization thus is "something that happens to the organization over time" (ibid.: 16).

7. *Bypassing* refers to a process in which organizational activities are influenced through culturally given, institutionally shared beliefs, without these (necessarily) leaving an imprint on the organization's formal structure (see Scott, 1991: 181). The latter becomes less important also because shared conceptions, beliefs, and symbols are transmitted through individuals' common attachment and reference to them (cf. Meyer/Scott/Deal, 1981).

As mentioned already, the various forms of isomorphism as well as the different mechanisms which seek to explain not only *that*, but *how* isomorphisms occur should only be seen as analytically distinct. Empirically, a mix of two or more forms of isomorphisms and mechanisms leading to them should presumably be more the rule than the exception. Although taken together these mechanisms can be expected to lead to some kind of structural homogeneity within an organizational field, "structure" referring here to *formal structures* (see Meyer/Rowan, 1977), it is important to note that looking at these mechanisms will probably reveal nothing about whether the resulting isomorphisms reflect a merely symbolic introduction of structural forms, or whether they reflect a process of efficient organizational design. More important, an analysis of isomorphisms on this basis tends to neglect the functional aspect of an organization's insertion into its environment. However, a focus on how isomorphism also occurs in terms of the description of and enactment upon organizational tasks would seem to offer a promising handle for grasping cleavages between the formal and the acting structure of organizations. More important, however, is to note that while analytically identifying the different forms of isomorphism and mechanisms leading to them opens up a rich spectrum which allows to account for a huge variety of processes of organizational transformation, these forms and mechanism are not necessarily logically tied to some of the (explicit or implicit) assumptions underlying neo-institutionalist thought. Thus, while for example the first three of the mechanisms described above would seem to attribute the main initiative for organizational transformation to the organization's environment, putting organizations more into some kind of "reactive" mode, the latter four mechanisms place more emphasis on the organization's own actions which motivate and lead to organizational transformations. What seems puzzling in this respect is the remaining vagueness regarding the question of whether organizations are primarily reactive or active in relation to their organizational fields, but also regarding the categorical compatibility regarding the mechanisms described.

Most important, it remains unclear as to which extent (voluntary) *action* on the part of an organization's member- or leadership is a key factor which in the end accounts for structural change, or whether agents within organizations form mere intermediaries in executing systemic processes.

It is at this point that we opt for a sharp cut and conceptually take up a basically Luhmannian understanding of "organization" as an operatively closed, autopoietic system. Taking such a step brings with it a number of immediate consequences for how we perceive emerging isomorphisms. First of all, the

mechanisms leading to isomorphisms described above must not be mistaken as *causal* relations. There is little question that causal relations do affect social systems, but if the idea of sociality and hence social systems being constituted of communication and communication alone is taken seriously, then any understanding of the evolution of social systems must not be based on stipulated cause-effects-relationships, but on the observation of operations. In such a scheme “causality” is by no means eliminated, but simply relegated towards its function in and for social systems:

“Thus, the scheme of causality can be seen to be a particular medium which provides possibilities of form-building, which then selects a specific convincing relation between specific causes and specific effects while at the same time neglecting that within the same causal constellation infinite other causes and infinite other effects could be held to be important..

From the possibilities which are provided by the medium, the observer must succeed to select some for form-building and through this actualize the non-actual. This may explain why in causal constellations the deciding on actions plays such a prominent role. The decision materializes the illusionary component of causality. It is and remains a personified mysterium, which however can also be read as a never-ending demand for ‘rationalization’...The connexion between past and future, between worlds of causes and worlds of effects needs to be effected operatively, i.e. now. In other words, there is no causality offered by the world into which man would need to contrive himself in cunningly” (Luhmann, 2000b, 179f; trans. MA/LH).

What we observe, in other words, are not causes and effects, but how organizations observe and through this construct their environment; how they form elements and structures out of themselves, which kind of decisional programs they form, how they communicate to their environment. Of particular importance is the fact that all communication with the environment (which does however not disrupt the operative closure of organizations as social systems) happens only on the conditions set and possibilities offered by world society’s function systems and specific symbolically generalized media of communication. It therefore becomes important to ask to what extent, for example, “isomorphism” is effected by processes which use “power” as symbolically generalized medium of communication (see Luhmann, 1988) and thus form genuinely political communication, or by economic communication utilizing money as symbolically generalized medium of communication, etc. If it can be operationalized, such a perspective offers the advantage of being able to clearly separate the “mechanisms” at work which effect isomorphism, without having to rely on the analytic vagueness implied in the “mere analytic” distinction between isomorphism and mechanisms leading to them.

Before we provide some thoughts of possible routes of operationalization stemming from these thoughts, it seems worth emphasizing again, however, that we do not argue that the analytic tools offered by neo-institutionalist thought in relation to isomorphism between organizations become obsolete. Rather, we try to preserve their analytic strengths yet putting them on a more solid conceptual footing in the sense of embedding them in conceptualizations rooted in a comprehensive theory of (world) society. Such a move of course does entail some quite radical breaks with the neo-institutionalist agenda. In particular, societal expectations will need to be seen as being articulated through society’s function systems, not emerging from a vague cultural background. It may, in the end, be no more than a matter of taste of whether one wants to stick to the semantic of “institution” for the purpose. For the time being, we stick to it for terms of simplification, being well aware of the fact that in the specific case the expectations embedded in the notion of an institution need to be specified more clearly as to their societal context.

Although we are well aware of the fact that such a seemingly eclectic approach will meet criticism from both neo-institutionalist and systems theoretical sides, we are confident that only through such a com-

plementary use of the two approaches, in the interest of understanding an important structural feature of contemporary world society, a mutually beneficial conceptual dialogue can be initiated.

It is on grounds of these assumptions that we inquire into international regional governmental organizations, embedded in an organizational field and understood as the sum of their internally constructed, relevant environments:

- a. How do they process institutional expectations, which we can now more closely specify as how organizations as operatively closed social systems observe their societal environment?
- b. Do they process these expectations in a similar fashion leading to isomorphisms between IRGOs and their organizational field? And particularly:
- c. Do IRGOs which operate within the same (or overlapping) organizational field(s) exhibit (emergent) structural similarities, i.e. isomorphisms in the context of processing societal expectations?

4. Approaching a research design

It might seem as if so far quite a lot of conceptual and theoretical baggage has been accumulated in order to approach a seemingly easy and already empirically quite well-studied phenomenon, namely the proliferation and development of international regional governmental organizations. However, opening up such conceptual issues is warranted if the analytic aim is to come up with case studies which are to go beyond existing ones in that from the very beginning they are designed so as to be plugged into a world society-theoretical framework. If the notion of “world society” is taken serious theoretically, and this means that there can be no “international relations” theory of world society, or a purely neo-institutionalist theory of world society, but only a “theory of society”-type theory of world society, then even concrete empirical analysis must not be devised separately from some basic considerations regarding such a theory. We have laid out a number of such considerations in close connection to Luhmann’s modern systems theory of society, particularly using it to modify, or better: re-embed, some conceptual designs as developed within neo-institutionalist sociology, trying to preserve their analytical strengths yet making them “fit” for being utilized for the analysis of particular structural feature of contemporary world society.

Particularly if seen against the prevalent non-communication between these two prominent approaches of sociology, as well as taking into consideration a number of critical voices who regard the possibility and fruitfulness of such a communication rather skeptically, this could not have been anything else than a first, explorative prolegomenon to a more substantial theoretical exchange. However, we feel that it serves the purpose of initiating such an exchange well if this is done in relation to a more specific research question at hand.

This research question was provided by the high variation between different accounts for the reasons and scopes of regionalising processes to be currently observed, which we argued was mainly due to these accounts being unconnected to and not embedded in attempts to conceptualize “world society”. While leaving the dialogue on “world society” between sociological and IR conceptualizations to a later point, we further argued that indeed the proliferation and development of international regional governmental organizations forms an instance of regionalising processes within contemporary world society (thus transcending the often sharply drawn divide between the notions of “regionalisation” and “regionalism”). How can the conceptual ideas regarding the definition of “organization” and “organiza-

tion-environment relations”, as well as those on “institutional isomorphisms” be put to analytical use for such a purpose? In closing, we offer some preliminary thoughts as to how to frame a study of the proliferation and development of IRGOs which opens the way to a number of empirical case studies.

What then, is an IRGO?

At first glance, there seems to be a clear definition of what constitutes an international governmental regional organization provided by international law. An IRGO would thus be an organization whose members are sovereign-nation states where membership is regionally bounded yet whose scope can range from the highly specific to an extremely comprehensive set of tasks. Yet, while such a legal formalist account enables an easy selection of what qualifies as an IRGO, it reveals little about their qualities, nor about how they develop and transform if seen in a world societal context. While, for example, accounts from the neoliberal school of thought within international relations theorizing seek to reflect upon this ambivalence by attributing a substantive as well as a processual understanding to the term “international organization” (i.e. referring to specific IOs as well as a process of international organizations altering the anarchic character of state-based international political system), things get more fuzzy if one seeks to combine such accounts with sociological insights drawn from organizational sociology. Clearly, the European Union would not be the prime example to cross an organizational sociologist's mind. Is the EU really an organizations, or isn't it rather, and at most, an agglomeration of various organizations such as the European council, the commission, the European Court of Justice etc.? This problematic becomes even more pressing if looking at “IOs” of an even more pronounced informal and intergovernmental character, such as for example APEC or ASEAN.

Yet, if such issues appear problematic, they do so because defining and differentiating organizations in essentialist terms will always remain a futile exercise (cf. also Luhmann, 2000b: 39f). An obvious alternative would be to understand organizations in terms of their functions for society, their “task” of coming up with decisions. Here, we run up against the same problem which perennially seems to plague attempts to understand the state as an organization (see Hasse/Krücken, 1999: 29; Luhmann, 2000a). In this situation, the insight that organizations in contrast to other social system differentiate themselves from their environment primarily on the basis of membership, may serve as a “prime directive” to assess whether something forms an organization or not. In this respect, it is perfectly legitimate to treat specific states (not “the state”) as a membership-(i.e. citizenship)-based organization, as much as it is legitimate to treat “international organizations”, including “international governmental regional organizations” as organizations in a sociological sense. The decisive criterion is a membership-based differentiation towards the outside. Thus, consultative ad hoc-fora between a number of states convened to deliberate on a specific issue would not normally qualify as organizations, whereas the EU, the OAU, or the OAS clearly do. For qualifying as an organization, it is then however not decisive of how clear-cut the membership criteria are, as long as operations are differentiated according to the distinction between membership/non-membership; nor is it decisive if the decisions through which the organization operates are taken primarily or exclusively by identifiable subordinate organizations (such as a secretariat, a council of ministers, etc.)

Of course, such a seemingly simple, yet theoretically warranted basic observation of what to treat as an organization reveals little to nothing about an individual organization and its development. As has

been argued already, for that purpose it is of paramount importance not to conceive of an organization as if it were some kind of isolated social system, but to observe it as it is constituted by a system-environment difference. But what constitutes the environment, the organizational field of any specific IRGO?

What is an IRGO's organizational field?

An answer to the question very much depends on the theoretical perspective taken on what is there in the world that matters. IR realists would identify a system of sovereign states as constituting the relevant environment, Grotian/English School realists would vote for a "society of states", while sociologists working in the "Stanford School" tradition would presumably cite a world polity/world culture to that respect. The straightforward answer stemming from a systems-theoretical perspective on world society would include all other social systems in world society save the one observed in the latter's environment. Most notably, this environment then consists of other organizations and function systems, such as law, politics, economics, etc. However, the organization is quite well able to distinguish between its environment and systems within its environment. It is these social systems which are observed as such by an organization in its environment which constitute its relevant organizational field. This observation forms the basic precondition for an observation to attempt to communicate with its environment. Yet, it is important to note that communication only happens within world society's function systems, using symbolically generalized communication media. This is the major twist which is added to a determination of organizational fields that would otherwise closely follow the neo-institutionalist path. Against this background, it is possible to observe how organizations observe and thereby construct their environment, particularly by observing social systems in their environment, i.e. other organizations. For IRGOs, the organizational field can thus consist of a great number and many different kinds of organizations, be they national bureaucracies, other IOs and IRGOs, INGOs, companies, etc. We concur with DiMaggio/Powell (1991c: 65) that "the structure of an organizational field cannot be determined a priori but must be defined on the basis of empirical investigation". However, the boundaries of an organizational field can never be "objectively" observed as if the organizational field were something out there. One cannot but observe how an organization observes its environment and thus, under the conditions of its operative closure, constructs its organizational field purely internally.

However, clearly differentiating between organizations in the environment of organizations and function systems in the environment of organizations within qualitative case studies should allow to differentiate much more clearly the "institutional environment" and the societal expectations contained therein than is the case with a purely neo-institutionalist methodology. With these modifications in mind, the neo-institutionalist route can be followed to quite some length nonetheless. Perceiving organizations as social systems does in no way imply to view them as organic wholes; they can to a significant extent be treated as (more or less) "loosely coupled arrays of standardized elements" (DiMaggio/Powell, 1991b: 14; Weick, 1995). What this implies in particular in respect to IRGOs is to untie them from any notion of "socialization" within an environment; the notion of socialization still features prominently in IR studies which thematize the influence of norms on actors' preferences and identities, (see, for example Wendt, 1999; Risse/Sikkink, 1999). Undoubtedly, there is a mode of normative ex-

pectation in world society, but with neo-institutionalists, we shift the focus on a mode of cognitive expectations. Within world society and the continuous need to deal with complexity in it, this mode presents itself to be the most appropriate given that it allows for a constant and dynamic change of expectations (and reactions towards them) in case they are disappointed (see Luhmann, 1972). "Not norms and values, but taken-for-granted scripts, rules, and classifications are the stuff of which institutions are made" (DiMaggio/Powell, 1991b: 15; see also Scott, 1995: xv).

How then to study this?

As hinted at already, there are numerous empirical pointers as to the phenomenon of a proliferation of IRGOs in the 20th century (see specifically: Murphy, 1994; Hawdon, 1996). Scanning the literature on specific IRGOs, not only, but in particular the EU, there is also preliminary evidence regarding a gradual transformation of some IRGOs to acquire numerous more tasks and responsibilities, coupled with ongoing transformations in organizational structures. Extremely "weak" IRGOs such as ASEAN produce more formal structures (secretariat, institutionalized contact with the environment, particularly also to other IRGOs within this environment as in ASEM). Without drawing on any of the theoretical backgrounds outlined here, a number of case studies have pointed to increasing structural similarities between IRGOs, indeed outright mimesis as for example in the relation between MERCOSUR and the EU (see Philips, 2001).

If such similarities can be further asserted through comparative case studies, then neo-institutionalism would no doubt be able to explain these observations quite well in terms of emerging isomorphisms between organizations and their environments, be they of a coercive kind, attributable to a common legal environment of adjustment expectations necessitated by the international financial markets, be they of a mimetic kind in which models perceived as successful and legitimate are copied (the diffusion possibly being aided by direct contacts between IRGOs, such as in the various regional dialogues undertaken by the EU), be they of a normative kind. What we argue, however, is that these kinds of isomorphisms between IRGOs and their environments do not take place on the basis of causal mechanisms, but must be seen as being mediated by function systems. And it is only by taking this mediation into account, the precise shape of which can only be observed in the specific case, that one is able to combine the study of IRGO development, transformation and isomorphism with evolutionary processes of world society as a whole.

In devising a design for empirical research following from this, we thus propose to do two things:

On the one hand, a quite simple longitudinal analysis which systematically documents the proliferation of IRGOs. On the other hand, a number of qualitative case studies. These case studies can be designed to accommodate three distinct dimensions:

In a *first* dimension, it would be necessary to further inquire into the extent to which indeed structural similarities between IRGOs and their environments, particularly between IRGOs and IRGOs in their environment can be discerned. This would require a close look at and documentation of formal structures as well as, following an argument made above, the tasks assumed by the organization. In a *second* dimension, the relevant environment of an organization as it is constructed by the organization would need to be described. The analysis of this dimension involves at least two tasks: on the one side, organizations in the organization's environment need to be described. This can be done

straightforwardly in a cursory fashion at first, only then to be specified more closely by looking intensively at the kind and intensity of communication between the organization and organizations in its environment. On the other side, particularly the *kind* of communication between the organization and organizations in its environment must then lead to more closely specify whether what is used is political, legal, economic, etc. communication and under what conditions which kind of communication is used. Only this analytic move permits to come up with a comprehensive picture of how an IRGO and IRGOs as a whole fit into the picture of the only social system to which there is no social - save internal - environment, namely world society. Then, in a *third* dimension and having specified the quality of organizational environments, is it possible to turn to the analysis of variables which are able to document various kinds of isomorphisms between IRGOs in the well-established neo-institutionalist fashion, yet crosslinking this analysis with the kind of perspective provided in the second dimension just outlined among others include founding dates and size of organizations, societal expectations geared towards the organizations their legal and political environment, interorganizational contacts, their strength and visibility within an organizational field, successes and legitimacies achieved on the ground of adopting new organizational models, etc.

In lieu of conclusion

We have sketched some thoughts about the direction in which a research design for studying the proliferation of IRGOs in world society in an empirically rich yet theoretically connective fashion might be devised. Admittedly, this constitutes a rather radical breakdown of research into the transformations taking place within contemporary world society. Yet, what we have sought to primarily argue *with* this contribution is that theoretical inquiry into world societal change must not be detached from focussing on more specific empirical phenomena and vice versa - even if this involves a number cumbersome, theoretical and conceptual translations probably unacceptable to many theoretical purists. We have sought to initiate such translations by establishing first markers of a dialogue between modern systems theory and neo-institutionalism, both of which offer conceptually and empirically rich accounts not only of global social transformation, but also more specifically of organizations. It is the thematic overlap regarding the latter which establishes the inquiry into the proliferation of and similarities between IRGOs as a promising field of research, of course with the distinct intent to later reinsert the results of such a research into the wider conceptualizations of global change and discussions about the very concept of "world society" itself.

This inevitably is a contribution which has thrown out more loose ends than it has tied up. But then, it is a contribution which understands itself as a conceptual and theoretical self-reflection on an empirical research project at its first point of fecundation, as much as it understands itself as an invitation to cross a number of boundaries, be they micro-macro, neo-institutionalist-systems theoretical, sociological-political science/IR.

Literature

- Abbott, Andrew 1998: *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Export Labor*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Albert, Mathias 1999: "Observing world politics. Luhmann's systems theory of society and international relations". *Millennium* 29/2: 239-265.
- Albert, Mathias et al. 2000: Albert, Mathias u.a. (eds.) 2000: *Civilizing World Politics. Society and Community Beyond the State*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Albert, Mathias/Brock, Lothar 2001: "The complexities of global change: conceptualizing the regulation of 'global structures'". In: Jörg Calließ/Christoph Hüttig (eds), *Loccumer Protokolle* (forthcoming).
- Albert, Mathias/Kratochwil, Friedrich 2001: "Conclusion". In: Albert, Mathias/Jacobson, David/Lapid, Yosef (eds.), *Identities, Borders, Orders: Rethinking International Relations Theory*
- Bango, Jenő 1998: *Auf dem Weg zur postglobalen Gesellschaft. Verlorenes Zentrum, abgebaute Peripherie, „erfundene“ Region*. Berlin: Duncker und Humblot.
- Bhagwati, Jagdish 1991: *The World Trading System at Risk*. Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Boli, John/Thomas, George (eds.) 1999: *World Polity Formation since 1875: World Culture and International Non-Governmental Organizations*. Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press.
- Buzan, Barry/Little, Richard 2000: *International Systems in World History. Remaking the Study of International Relations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Covaleski, Mark A./Dirsmith, Mark W. 1988: "An institutional perspective on the rise, social transformation, and fall of a university budget". *Administrative Science Quarterly* 33: 562-587.
- DiMaggio, Paul J. 1983: "State expansion and organizational fields". In: Hall, Richard H./Quinn, Robert H. (eds.): *Organizational Theory and Public Policy*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 147-161
- DiMaggio, Paul J. 1988: "Interest and agency in institutional theory." In: Zucker, L.G. (ed.), *Institutional Patterns and Organizations*. Cambridge, MA: Ballinger: 3-21.
- DiMaggio, Paul J./Powell, Walter W. 1991a: *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- DiMaggio, Paul J./Powell, Walter W. 1991b: "Introduction". In: DiMaggio/Powell, 1991a: 1-38.
- DiMaggio, Paul J./Powell, Walter W. 1991c: "The iron cage revisited: institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields". In: DiMaggio/Powell, 1991a: 63-82.
- Dornbusch, Sanford M./Scott, Richard W. 1975: *Evaluation and the Exercise of Authority*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Fawcett, Louis/Hurrell, Andrew 1995: *Regionalism in World Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995.
- Friedland, Roger/Alford, Robert R. 1991: "Bringing society back in: symbols, practices, and institutional contradictions. In: DiMaggio/Powell, 1991a: 232-263.
- Galaskiewicz, Joseph/Wassermann, Stanley 1989: "Mimetic and normative processes within an σ -organizational field: an empirical test". *Administrative Science Quarterly* 34: 454-479.
- Gamble, Andrew/Payne, Andrew (eds.) 1996a: *Regionalism and the New World Order*. London: Macmillan.
- Gamble, Andrew/Payne, Andrew 1996b: "Conclusion: the new regionalism". In: Gamble/Payne 1996a: 247-264.
- Hasse, Raimund/Krücken, Georg 1999: *Neo-Institutionalismus*. Bielefeld: transcript.
- Hawdon, James, 1996: *Emerging Organizational Forms. The Proliferation of Regional Intergovernmental Organizations in the Modern World System*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Hettne, Björn 1993: "Neo-mercantilism: the pursuit of regionness". *Cooperation and Conflict* 28/3: 211-232.
- Hettne, Björn/Inotai, András/Sunkeö, Osvaldo (eds.) 1999: *Globalism and the New Regionalism*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Hilkermeier, Lena 2001: *Zwischen Sein und Schein: Welche Handlungsmöglichkeiten haben Organisationen?* (in preparation).
- Jepperson, Ronald J, Wendt, Alexander, Katzenstein, Peter J. 1996: "Norms, identity, and culture in national security". In: Katzenstein, Peter J. (ed.), *The Culture of National Security. Norms and Identity in World Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press: 33-75.
- Joenniemi, Pertti (ed.) 1997: *Neo-Nationalism or Regionality? The Restructuring of Political Space around the Baltic Rim*. Stockholm: NordRefo.
- Khalil, Elias L. (1995): "Organizations versus Institutions". In: *Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics*, Vol. 151, No. 3, 445-466
- Kneer, Georg/Nassehi, Armin 1997: *Niklas Luhmanns Theorie sozialer Systeme: eine Einführung..* München: Fink, 3rd ed.

- Larson, Magali S. 1977: *The Rise of Professionalism: A Sociological Analysis*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Luhmann, Niklas 1965: *Grundrechte als Institution. Ein Beitrag zur politischen Soziologie*. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot
- Luhmann, Niklas 1970: "Institutionalisierung - Funktion und Mechanismus im sozialen System der Gesellschaft". In: Schelsky, H. (ed.), *Zur Theorie der Institution*. Düsseldorf: Bertelsmann Universitätsverlag, 27-41.
- Luhmann, Niklas 1972: "Die Weltgesellschaft". *Archiv für Rechts- und Sozialphilosophie* 57, 1-34.
- Luhmann, Niklas 1988: *Macht*. Stuttgart: Enke, 2nd ed.
- Luhmann, Niklas 1990: *Ökologische Kommunikation. Kann die moderne Gesellschaft sich auf ökologische Gefährdung einstellen?* Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 2nd ed.
- Luhmann, Niklas 1992: *Universität als Milieu*. Bielefeld: Haux.
- Luhmann, Niklas 1995: *Social Systems*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Luhmann, Niklas 1997: *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (2 vols.). Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- Luhmann, Niklas 2000a: *Die Politik der Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- Luhmann, Niklas 2000b: *Organisation und Entscheidung*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag
- March, J.G. 1981: "Decision making perspective. Decisions in organization and theories of choice". In: Van de Ven, A.H./Joyce, W.F. (eds.), *Perspectives on Organization Design and Behavior*. New York: Wiley: 205-244.
- March, James G./Olsen, Johan P. 1976: *Ambiguity and Choice in Organizations*. Bergen: Universitetsforlaget.
- March, James G./Olsen, Johan P. 1984: "The New Institutionalism: Organizational Factors in Political Life". In: *American Political Science Review* 78/3: 734-749.
- Meyer, John W./Boli, John/Thomas, George 1994: "Ontology and rationalization in the Western cultural account". In: Scott, W. Richard/Meyer, John W. (eds.), *Institutional Environments and Organizations: Structural Complexity and Individualism*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage: 9-27.
- Meyer, John W./Boli, John/Thomas, George M./Ramirez, Francisco O. 1997: "World society and the nation-state". *American Journal of Sociology* 103, 144-181.
- Meyer, John W./Rowan, Brian 1977: "Institutionalized organizations: formal structure as myth and ceremony". *American Journal of Sociology* 83: 340-363.
- Meyer, John W./Scott, W. Richard/Deal, T.E. 1981: "Institutional and technical sources of organizational structure". In: Stein, H.D. (ed.), *Organization and the Human Services*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press: 151-178.
- Murphy, Craig 1994: *International Organization and Industrial Change*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ohmae, Kenichi 1993: *The End of the Nation State. The Rise of Regional Economies*. London: Free Press.
- Peters, B. Guy 1999: *Institutional Theory in Political Science*. London. Pinter.
- Pfeffer, Jeffrey 1982: *Organizations and Organization Theory*. Marshfield Mass.: Pitman.
- Philips, Nicola 2001: "The evolution of regionalist governance in the Mercosur". Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the British International Studies Association, Bradford, 18-20 December.
- Powell, Walter W. 1991: "Expanding the scope of institutional analysis". In: DiMaggio/Powell 1991: 183-203.
- Risse, Thomas/Ropp, Stephen C./Sikkink, Kathryn 1999: *The Power of Human Rights. International Norms and Domestic Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Scott, W. Richard 1986: *Grundlagen der Organisationstheorie*. Frankfurt/M.: Campus.
- Scott, W. Richard 1987: "The Adolescence of Institutional Theory". In: *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 32, 493-511.
- Scott, W. Richard 1991: "Unpacking institutional arguments". In: DiMaggio/Powell 1991: 164-182.
- Scott, W. Richard 1994: "Institutions and organizations: towards a theoretical synthesis". In: Scott, W. Richard/Meyer, John W. (eds.), *Institutional Environments and Organizations: Structural Complexity and Individualism*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage: 55-80.
- Scott, W. Richard, 1995: *Institutions and Organizations. Foundations for Organizational Science*. London: Sage.
- Selznick, Philip 1949: *TVA and the Grass Roots*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Selznick, Philip 1957: *Leadership in Administrations*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Shaw, Martin, 2000: *Theory of the Global State. Globality as an Unfinished Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stichweh, Rudolf 2000: *Die Weltgesellschaft*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- Stinchcombe, Arthur, L. 1965: "Social structure and organizations". In: March, James G. (ed.): *Handbook of Organizations*. Chicago: Rand McNally, 142-193

- Storper, Michael 1997: *The Regional World. Territorial Development in a Global Economy*. New York: Guildford.
- Thomas, George et al. 1987: *Institutional Structure. Constituting State, Society, and the Individual*. London.
- Thomas, George in preparation: "Research designs for studying world society" (ms.)
- Tolbert, Pamela S./Zucker, Lynne G. 1983: "Institutional sources of change in the formal structure of organizations: the diffusion of civil service reform, 1880-1935". *Administrative Science Quarterly* 28: 22-39.
- Useem, Michael 1979: "The social organization of the American business elite and participation of corporation directors in the governance of American institutions". In: *American Sociological Review* 44: 553-572.
- Weick, Karl E. 1995: *Der Prozeß des Organisierens*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp
- Wendt, Alexander 1999: *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zucker, Lynne G. 1983: "Organizations as institutions". In: Bacharach, S.B. (ed.), *Research in the Sociology of Organizations*. Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press: 1-42.