

Structure Formation in World Society

The *Eigenstructures* of World Society and the Regional Cultures of the World

(73rd Annual Meeting of the Eastern Sociological Society, Philadelphia, February 27 – March 2, 2003)

Abstract: The paper criticizes theories of world society which look at this system from the perspective of social/cultural unification of the world. It criticizes as well the position which describes global modernity as consisting from “multiple modernities”. Both of these theories presuppose too much continuity in the emergence of world society. Instead the paper looks at the formation of new structural patterns germane to world society. It will discuss some of these structural patterns: e.g. function systems, formal organizations, epistemic communities, networks, markets, world events. From this it will derive the argument that world society is a kind of “hyperstructure” arising from the dominance of these global structural patterns. This hyperstructure does not eliminate traditional structures, especially the traditional regional cultures of the world. But it is overlaying and thereby reducing their informational relevance in social interaction and communication processes. And then a final point will be that diversity in world society is not diversity persisting from traditional cultures but is an emergent diversity arising from the *Eigenstructures* of world society.

The argument of this paper presupposes that present-day society is world society. That is there is only one system in the world which fulfills the preconditions of the concept of society. Normally one would then ask: What is a society? The concept of society I assume is based on communication, on the conditions of access to communication and on the conditions of exclusion from communications. Even the exclusion from the communicative possibilities of world society has to be analyzed as structural effect of world society, and therefore as part of the dynamics of the system. Furthermore my concept of society has a certain affinity to Talcott Parsons. Parsons defined society in a close approximation to Aristotle as the highest order social system which encloses all relevant social structures and processes into the system. What distinguishes society from other social systems in this Parsonian understanding is “self-sufficiency”. If one takes this definition serious, only world society is a possible candidate for the fulfillment of its conditions although Parsons himself in 1960 derived other conclusions from his proposal.

In historical terms I describe a highly unusual circumstance. Human history was always characterized by the coexistence of at least hundreds, more probable of thousands of societies which had some contacts with one another but were

mainly independent from one another. The same is true for the civilizational empires of the last three- to four-thousand years which should be conceived as self-sufficient societies with occasional exchanges and contacts with other societies. Insofar it can be said that the rise of the European-Atlantic societal system since approximately the fifteenth century and the incorporation of the whole of the remaining world into this system brings about a singularity in the history of human societies. Never before there was only one societal system on earth.

The question this paper will focus upon is how this unique system of society has to be conceived. If it absorbs the multiplicity of empires and societies from the ancient and medieval world how does it do this? There are two prominent options in the present literature on globalization. The first theoretical proposal conceives world society as a unifying force which systematically reduces behavioural and cultural differences. This thesis has sometimes been called McDonaldization (G. Ritzer) a name which might prove to be a misnomer if McDonald should become another example of corporate decay. The other theoretical option postulates the integration of pre-existing diversity into the system of world society. This thesis is best known under the title of “multiple modernities” (S.N. Eisenstadt). Both of these theories are probably wrong as both of them presuppose too much continuity in the emergence of world society. This continuity is either a continuity of unifying trends (which are of course to be observed in world society) or it is a continuity guaranteed by the maintenance of pre-existing cultural differences.

This paper will instead look for structural patterns germane to world society. Therefore it points to discontinuities instead of continuities. These structural patterns I call *Eigenstructures* of world society thereby making use of a term well known in mathematics but not yet in sociology. *Eigenstructures* reproduce pre-existent cultural diversity and they push it back at the same time, creating new social and cultural patterns of their own. This argument is based on a cumulative model of social structure which does not describe social change as substitution of new structures for old structures. Instead it hypothesizes plural levels of structure formation in social systems which means that new structures normally overlay old structures but do not extinguish them. They rather reduce the informational relevance and the frequency of activation of the structures they push back over very long stretches of historical time.

The following argument will make it clear that the *Eigenstructures* of world society are not very recent inventions. Some of them are structural patterns going back to European middle ages. But this only points once more to the fact that world society itself is a system with a history of at least five- to six-hundred years. And these *Eigenstructures* are related to World Society via reciprocal intensifications. They advance the emergence of world society to the degree they

are articulated themselves, and on the other hand they are privileged by the emerging system of world society as structural patterns compatible with it.

There exists an open list of structural patterns which exemplify the argument this paper is going to make. In the following I will briefly characterize six of the candidates from this provisional list of structural patterns:

1) The first and probably most important candidate on my list is the **function system**. World Society does not arise via the encounter and conflict of the great civilizations of the world – this seems to be the position of Samuel Huntington - as it does arise via the emergence of functional differentiation. By this is meant that thematically specialized function systems come about as global communication complexes such as the world economy or world science or world law or world literature which somehow undermine the autonomy of the regional cultures of the world without attacking these cultures directly. This offers a good illustration of a new structural pattern overlaying an older one without these two layers conflicting with one another necessarily. An interesting contemporary case study of this could be the ongoing integration of the Islamic economy into the world economy. On the one hand there is a corpus of Islamic economic law which is incompatible with many practices normal in the Western world, on the other hand the last few years saw numerous unification tendencies – such as the development of Islamic indexes and the foundation of the “Islamic Financial Services Board” at Kuala Lumpur – all of which try to enhance the comparability between different Islamic investments and between Islamic and non-Islamic investments. These developments have a highly technical character which somehow insulates them from cultural conflicts.

Similar arguments can be advanced for the other function systems of world society – such as science, politics, education, law and others. All of them are not only ways of connecting highly specific communications to other communications. All of them are furthermore producers of global semantics, and therefore besides the *Eigenstructures* of world society they unintentionally produce what might be called *Eigencultures* of the global system.

2) The second candidate on my list is the **formal organization** which is an invention which derives from the secular and spiritual corporations of the late middle ages. Among them were monastic orders, universities, incorporated cities, trading companies and others. Even in early modern Europe one could easily observe the globalizing force due to the principle of formal organization. Among monastic orders the Jesuits are a significant example as they succeeded in a few decades between 1540 and 1620 to cover Europe and parts of Asia and the Americas with a dense network of hundreds of Jesuit educational and ecclesiastical organizations. The celibate and the free transferability of the personnel of the order was perhaps the most important enabling condition.

If one looks at modern organizations one finds similar circumstances as conditions of their relevance for global society. They are successful in transferring personnel over boundaries not so easily crossed in other social systems; they are machines for the internal transfer of knowledge of which it is often said that there are no effective mechanisms of transfer via markets; and they combine a often quickly built global network of branches with a local situatedness of the individual subsidiary. There are many types of organizations, but what is remarkable in looking at most of them is this compatibility of globality and locality, of global connectedness and local situatedness.

3) The third candidate I would like to propose is the **network**. It is again something to be observed in all societies transcending the level of interaction systems. There are networks in kinship, friendship and patron-client-relations. But on the other hand networks seem to be a dramatic case of a social form which only finds its adequate context of expansion in world society. I want to point to some interrelations. Networks in contradistinction to autopoietic systems can connect completely heterogeneous units. That is their becoming a prominent social form interacts with the individualization of personalities. Individuals must be allowed to enter into network relations, and the potential global extension of these structures is based on the social acceptance of “weak ties”; “weak ties” being characteristic of most translocal networks. Networks are lateral, they do know centres but do not necessarily have a hierarchical top and they can be very big, including thousands of nodes. Networks are evolutionary, that is they are based on point-to-point relations which can be changed locally by continually adding and losing network ties. All these characteristics seem to establish a strong affinity of networks to global social relations, and it is obvious that the network metaphor in itself is one of the strong paradigms in describing world society. Some of the prominent terms of network theory – connectivity, connectedness, interrelatedness – are at the same time core concepts in globalization theory.

4) Networks and organizations have to be distinguished from **epistemic communities**. Epistemic communities are based on strong cognitive and normative commitments, something which organizations do not need as they are based on membership rules, and something which networks can not achieve as they are often based on informal and weak ties. Epistemic communities are again known for centuries already. The most important types since late medieval Europe were professional communities such as clerics, medical doctors and lawyers, and scientific and disciplinary communities such as physicists and philologists which only in 19th-century society separated from professional communities. Often epistemic communities are strongly embedded into the structural frame of a specific function system. Sometimes they are directed by contravening values. A good example is the global community of Linux developers which tries to estab-

lish a certain kind of software as a public good although nearly all the members of this community write proprietary software in their occupational lives.

Epistemic communities are a strong force in globalization processes as the cognitive and normative commitments on which they are based refer to a certain matter of fact and to the knowledge connected to this matter of fact. Such a factually oriented kind of knowledge is not easily compatible with local or regional restrictions on its relevance. The global inclusion of competent and interested parties into such an epistemic community is to be expected. The sociological concept of *knowledge society* obviously refers to this proliferation of global epistemic communities. As it is the case with function systems these epistemic communities obviously counteract all ethnocentric cultural formations without attacking them directly.

5) The fifth candidate on my tentative list is a somehow improbable one. It is the sociological concept of the **market**. To make this plausible one has to make use of a sufficiently abstract concept of the market which is not immediately restricted to economic contexts. You find a good example of such a concept in Harrison Whites metaphor of the market as a mirror in which the participants of a market observe one another reciprocally. That seems to be a remarkable insight which points to the market as a self-contained way of structure formation in society. It is not based on ties (networks) not on norms and rules (organizations) and not on the commitments characteristic of epistemic communities. Instead it only needs the mutual observation of all participants in a market and the orientational consequences of these observations. Harrison White adds the mathematical concept of self-similarity which means an independence of the basic properties of a market from the level of social reality on which it operates. That is, small and much bigger social systems do not differ in their basic properties as long as both of them are constituted as markets. This indifference of properties towards levels of social reality is again a potent force in globalization processes as you can easily transit from global to local levels and back.

6) The sixth social form I want to mention here is the **world event**. This term means the staging of the world in an organized event which principally can be repeated at other times and at other places. Such a world event will always have a thematic focus; it will try to attract and to include as active participants everyone who is relevant for the respective thematic complex. And it is addressed to other categories of persons who function as the public of this world event. This public must necessarily be a global public.

World events must be identified reflexively as such. They produce self-descriptions which refer to their world relevance or world status. This reflexive character is responsible for the world event being a comparatively late invention. One might point to the first “world exhibition” in London in 1851; then to the

modern “Olympic games” which are organized since 1896. “World summits” and “world conferences” are other prominent examples; and finally September 11, 2001, has demonstrated the possibility and effectiveness of the terrorist world event which in this case was singularly successful in including a global public and changing the parameters of world politics.

I will finish my list of *Eigenstructures* of world society, here. But it is an open list, of course, and other prospective candidates may be added. One might think of the “world public” as the internal environment of global function systems, or of “global microstructures” or “global interaction systems” which are strictly localized in the sense of one participant being in the “response presence” of the other one, but which are able to span any spatial distance at all and are able to arise in similar forms everywhere in the world.

All these forms may be centuries old. But they become increasingly prominent in the history of world society. This makes it plausible that world society does not eliminate the regional cultures of the world via homogenization. Instead it superposes ever new levels of structure formation which push back the informational relevance of regional cultures and substitute for them new sources of diversity.

Therewith the identification of diversity and locality which is very prominent in the contemporary globalization literature becomes invalid. All these possibilities of structure formation in world society are in themselves sources of diversity; and in all these cases of new production processes of diversity one will never experience the diversity produced as a local phenomenon.

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