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**“Public Otherhood”: World Society,  
Theorization and Global Systems Dynamics**

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# **“Public Otherhood”: World Society, Theorization and Global Systems Dynamics**

**Abstract** The paper explores common ground between neoinstitutionalist world polity research and systems theoretical world society theory. It sets off with the observation that there is an interesting convergence of basic assumptions as well as of future challenges for both theoretical endeavours. Against a shared macro-constructivist background, both approaches converge in similar difficulties from different directions: Whereas neoinstitutionalism is particularly strong in the conceptualization of diffusion, including, most notably, the globalizing effects of “otherhood” and “theorization” in modern world polity, systems theory’s strengths lie in the systematic and historical reconstruction of system differentiation and evolution. Both strengths have corresponding weaknesses: Neoinstitutionalism succeeds in capturing the isomorphism induced by the inexorable growth of world polity but fails to explain particular field dynamics in which diffusion and theorization of diffusing models are embedded. In contrast, systems theory gives elaborate accounts of fields such as the economy, politics, law, science, religion etc. but fails to show how these fields actually developed their specific globalizing dynamics. For different reasons, then, both perspectives have trouble explaining how world society has largely become the creation of “others” specializing on the construction, theorization and evaluation of actors and contributing to global isomorphism as well as to the dynamic production of differences in specialized global fields. The first part of the paper tries to expose this common challenge as clearly as possible. The second part claims that a more elaborate concept of “public otherhood”, distinguishing more sharply between “significant others” and “generalized others”, may contribute to a solution of this problem and, consequently, to mutual stimulation between both theoretical perspectives.

## **1. Introduction**

There is a line of thought in globalization research which might be called the ironic theory of globalization – ironic in that it holds observers, rather than actors, responsible for the making of world society. As Nils Brunsson and Bengt Jacobsson put it, “there are plenty of people in the modern world who know what is best for everyone else” (2000: 1). Or in John Meyer’s terms: “rationalized others”, not actors, drive the globalization process (Meyer 1994). In this paper we take this “ironic turn” as the point of departure for connecting world polity

research with systems theory and its concept of “world society.” Based on the conceptual work of Niklas Luhmann, this theory has produced some general outlines on the history and structural characteristics of modern world society (cf. Luhmann 1971, Stichweh 2007) but has only rudimentarily tackled more specific problems of globalization research. In this regard, it might benefit from the empirical insights of neoinstitutionalist research on the world polity and from adopting the ironic concept of otherhood. Vice versa, we submit that the strengths of systems theory may contribute significantly to the ironic strand of globalization theory.

## **2. World polity research and world society theory**

World polity research and world society theory share some premises that set them apart from the mainstream of globalization research. First, both theories do not reduce globalization to the delocalization of social structures in increasingly global network relations as does the majority of the globalization literature (e.g. Held et al. 1999). Instead, they analyse world culture/world society as a reality in its own right with growing impact on social structures on local and national levels, including the idea that the nation state itself is a product, rather than the victim, of modern world society (cf. Meyer et al. 1997; Stichweh 2000a). Considering this emphasis on top-down-processes of globalization, both theories may be called “macro” theories of globalization.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, both approaches share the conviction that actors and actions are not to be taken as givens but as socio-cultural *products*, including all kinds of “rationality” that might be attributed to them. In taking actorhood as an explanandum and focusing on institutions and processes leading to the formation of modern actorhood, both approaches may also be considered as “constructivist” theories.

Empirically, world polity research has been quite successful in showing the virtues of such a macro-constructivist approach. A wealth of studies ranging from higher education to environmental policies, from women’s rights to international science organizations has shown how a “rationalized” world culture from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>1</sup> A conceptual difference which should already be mentioned here: Whereas the basic concept of neoinstitutionalism, evidently, is “institution”, the basic concept of modern systems theory is “communication”; see also Thomas 2004, Greve/Heintz 2005, Hasse/Krücken 2005 on some further conceptual similarities and differences.

onwards has increasingly taken hold of the global political and social order.<sup>2</sup> In a nutshell, the argument is captured by a little thought experiment (Meyer/Boli/Thomas/Ramirez 1997): Imagine a newly discovered island and how it is quickly conquered by the experts of world polity and thus transformed into a proper nation state. Based on this rich empirical work it seems that in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially after world war II, the standards of actorhood have risen to such a degree that individuals, organizations and nation states now may appear as “little gods” (Meyer 2000).

Regarding theory, world polity research is based on a sophisticated conceptualization of diffusion which originated in the diffusion-of-innovation literature (e.g. Rogers 1983) but rapidly developed into a distinctive neoinstitutionalist research program, starting with an article on coercive, mimetic and normative mechanisms of diffusion that explain the isomorphism in “organizational fields” beyond instrumental rationality (DiMaggio/Powell 1983). In the 1990s, the interest in isomorphic processes of diffusion was complemented by a growing interest in cultural conditions of diffusion, prominently expressed by David Strang and John Meyer who argued that the “theorization” of cultural models should be understood as an important facilitator and accelerator of diffusion, particularly with regard to the abstract, universal, globally applicable models that have become the defining feature of modern world polity: By making comparable the formerly incomparable, by inventing common cognitive world-perceptions and by introducing common criteria for evaluation, world polity enhances diffusion independently of/in addition to existing network relations (Strang/Meyer 1993). Later Meyer, drawing on Mead’s “generalized other”, called the agents of these cultural or institutional (as opposed to merely relational) processes of diffusion “rationalized others” who rely on institutions of “otherhood” (Meyer 1994, 1995), emphasizing that the isomorphism of modern world polity is rooted in mere observation, counselling and theorization rather than in accountably rational action.

Those guiding ideas, i.e. institutional isomorphism, isomorphism by theorization and worldwide isomorphism produced by global “otherhood”, still define the theoretical core of world polity research. Much like “the home territory of diffusion is the

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<sup>2</sup> E.g. Boli-Bennett/Meyer 1978; Meyer 1980; Boli 1987; Meyer/ Ramirez/ Soysal 1992; Boli/ Thomas 1999; Berkovitch 1999; Meyer 2000; for a recent overview Drori 2008.

innovation” (Strang/Soule 1998: 265), then, the home territory of neoinstitutionalism seems to be isomorphism. Of course, isomorphism was never meant to deny all national, regional or local differences. Early in the development of neoinstitutionalism, Meyer and Rowan (1977) pointed to regular forms of loose coupling of formal convergences and informal practices, reducing isomorphism to a partly “formal” phenomenon, allowing for differences on the “informal” level (see also Brunsson 1989 on “talk” and “action”; for further conceptualization Meyer/Jepperson 2000). Moreover, it is a recurrent theme in John Meyer’s work that the isomorphism of the modern rationalized world culture comes with new possibilities to celebrate “expressive” local differences such as language, national traditions etc. (e.g. Meyer 2000). If there is a weakness of world polity research, we suppose, it is not an overemphasis on isomorphism or a neglect of local differences as such but a certain lack of sense *for the production of differences and dynamics within world culture itself*.<sup>3</sup>

In order to understand (and possibly correct) this weakness, helpful suggestions can be drawn from Marion Fourcade’s (2006) recent work on the development of economics as a global profession in the 20<sup>th</sup> century which she uses to apply and modify the institutionalist model of globalization.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, she adopts the neoinstitutionalist framework, including the insights on theorization, to explain the globalizing effects of universalized economic knowledge – such as “pure markets” – since the neoclassical period in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, she points to deficits of the neoinstitutionalist framework which should lead globalization research to go “beyond diffusion”.

The critical arguments of Fourcade’s analysis are concerned not with the growth of theorized economic knowledge as such but with *broader field dynamics* which she sees at work in economic globalization. Four such arguments, which we may be called “ecological” arguments, can be distinguished: First, inspired by Marx, Fourcade emphasizes the dual expansionist logic of the modern economic system, striving for

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<sup>3</sup> For a similar recent evaluation see Schneiberg/Clemens (2006: 197): “The development of the world polity or culture itself is only recently emerging as a more prominent topic of inquiry.”

<sup>4</sup> For further recent suggestions on how the neoinstitutionalist research program might be improved, see e.g. Krücken 2005, Schneiberg/Clemens 2006; specifically with regard to systems theory, with slightly different focus: Thomas 2004; Hasse/Krücken 2008; see also König 2008 for suggestions of actor-theoretical amendments to world polity theory; for a critical summary of recent backdrops to actors and “institutional entrepreneurs” see Hasse/Krücken 2008.

both “vertical” constant change (continuous upheaval, temporal dimension) and “horizontal” expansion (globalization, spatial dimension), and then attributes the very same dual logic to the economics profession, i.e. to private consultants, public technocrats or scientific experts striving for global expansion and continuous revolution of economic knowledge. Secondly, inspired by Bourdieu’s field theory, she sees professionals and their economic models constantly competing within the economic professional field, the continuous renewal of economic models being a source as well as an effect of internal competition. Thirdly, she claims that economic ideas and economics as a profession build a “dialectical” relationship with the economic praxis, affecting it as well as being affected by it on a continuous basis, providing for continuous “creative destruction” of the economic praxis as well as the economics profession itself. Fourth, in her view, the economics profession competes with other professions for “jurisdiction” (Abbott) in the wider professional environment. With these arguments, Fourcade projects a *global economic field* divided into a “practical” and a “professional” segment which constantly construct and reconstruct themselves in a dialectical relationship.

Despite their strengths, Fourcade’s arguments are incomplete. They are strong in pointing to the continuous change induced by theorizing others within broader field dynamics. Although one might challenge the idea that economic scientific experts, technocrats, consultants etc. are a “profession” on a par with traditional professions such as lawyers and doctors (maybe preferring a broader term like “economic experts”), Fourcade’s main points can be appreciated independently of this terminological question. Most importantly, to our knowledge, she is the first to show *how otherhood and theorization can be analyzed as part of a historical analysis of a specific global field*. In doing so, firstly, she contributes to the analysis of isomorphism itself, showing that the particular characteristics of a field, including the experts associated with it, are cultural conditions of global diffusion in their own right. Secondly, and even more importantly, she suggests a shift in analytical focus from isomorphism to constant changes within a field. Going beyond pure diffusion analyses she points to a possible explanation for the *continuous production of differences within a global field*, i.e. to the

constant production of differences *within* rationalized (as opposed to merely “expressive”) world culture as a genuine problem for world society research.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, Fourcade’s arguments are incomplete regarding how these *field dynamics* are actually fuelled and produced. She points to four factors: (1) the emergence and diffusion of a universal, quantified economic knowledge with neoclassical origins (the actual “theorization” argument); (2) the institutionalization of economics in universities and modern nation-states; (3) transnational linkages/policy networks; (4) competitive struggles for jurisdiction within the economic “profession” and the wider field of professions. These arguments offer profound insights into the development of the economic rhetoric, on relationships between the economic and the political field and on network linkages within the economic field, *but they do not deal with the dynamic relationship of the “practical” economy with the “theorizing” economic rhetoric itself*. Fourcade, much like Bourdieu himself, takes the discursive dynamics of the field largely as a mirror in which she observes competition happening in the field without considering the “mirroring” process itself. Thus, her analysis remains at the surface of the field dynamics induced by economic theorization and fails to address a number of interesting questions, namely: What exactly is the *place of theorization* within the broader dynamics of a field? How, besides inventing abstract models allowing for global comparability, does theorization contribute to the *temporal* dynamics of a field? And how can we explain the dynamics of theorization themselves: the very fact that otherhood has become such a dominating force in the making of modern fields?

We will argue that a more general but simultaneously more specific understanding of theorization is necessary to explore the discursive sources of otherhood and to gain a deeper understanding of the temporal field dynamics enabled by theorization. At first, however, let us develop our view on common weaknesses of world polity research and world society theory in more detail. Adding Fourcade’s arguments to the theoretical core of world polity research, a current picture of the neoinstitutionalist theoretical

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<sup>5</sup> For a similar general argument see a recent evaluation of institutional analysis: “As suggested by discourse analysis—the progression from elaboration to taken-for-grantedness to renewed contestation—the study of coherence, incoherence, and change provides opportunities for understanding relations among institutional mechanisms and for exploring how the multiplex, fractured, or contradictory nature of fields is itself a critical source of transformational pressures.” (Schneifeld/Clemens 2006: 214)

framework might look like this: (1) The making and expansion of world society is a matter of isomorphism by diffusion beyond actors' rationalities, (2) isomorphism by diffusion is also a matter of acceleration by theorization/otherhood, and (3) acceleration by otherhood is also a matter of specific dynamics of (and competitive struggles within) the internal and external ecology of global fields.

With these global field dynamics, translated as global systems dynamics, we reach the home territory of the systems theoretical version of world society theory which has a rich tradition of systematic and historical analyses of social systems, particularly functional systems with specific codes and programs, criteria of good and bad performances, performance and audience roles etc. Therefore, systems theory is particularly strong in explaining the autonomy, differentiation and evolution of macro-systems such as politics, economy, law, science, religion, education, sport etc. (e.g. Luhmann 1988, 1990, 1995, 2000; Stichweh 1988). Yet when it comes to globalization, this strength has also proved to be a certain weakness, as it is precisely the focus on system differentiation that seems to constrain the theory's disposition to tackle empirical problems of globalization. The reason is not that globalization couldn't be treated more seriously within this framework. Rather, the framework as outlined by Luhmann tends to underestimate the conceptual problems associated with globalization research. For systems theory, globalization is intertwined with differentiation as both are based on the *specific universalism* of societal subsystem, i.e. that systems such as the economy, law or politics claim universal applicability from the very specific perspective of their respective problems and 'codes'. Spatial boundaries do not 'make sense' for societal subsystems and globalization, hence, becomes a mere side-effect of universalism (Luhmann 1997: 809). This quasi-automatic conceptual connexion between differentiation and globalization may explain why Niklas Luhmann thought of world society as a more or less natural outcome of functional differentiation (cf. Luhmann 1971, 1982) although he never actually examined the emergence and genesis of world society in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, even the most elaborate criteria of differentiation and system evolution do *not* explain how these systems develop an inherent tendency towards globalization. It is one thing to show that economy, politics, law, science, art, sport etc. create their own codes, programmes, and roles, and quite another to show how these characteristics drive the globalization of these fields.

Only one substantial argument has been brought forward to improve on this state of research – an argument that unwittingly confirms the aforementioned critique. Rudolf Stichweh has argued that the globalization of science in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century was fuelled by the increasing differentiation of the scientific field in specialized sub-disciplines, driving scientific communities to search for communication addresses outside of national borders (cf. Stichweh 2000b, 2003).<sup>6</sup> Undoubtedly, this argument points to insights that can be derived from a systems theoretical approach to globalization, showing that internal differentiation can be an important factor of globalization its own right. However, it doesn't take seriously enough that the problems associated with the global expansion of a system may be quite different from those associated with the differentiation of a system as such.<sup>7</sup> Specifically, it fails to take into account "otherhood" and "theorization", which, as shown above, should be integral parts of the analysis of global fields. Consequently, important questions are left open: How do scientific disciplines actually develop the tendency to enlarge the number of scientific addresses? How are universalization and globalization of science *produced* and bound together in scientific discourse? How is the internal drive towards universalization and inclusion discursively produced and enhanced? Without dealing with these more "constructivist" questions, the globalizing dynamics of the scientific field remain a quasi-automatic outcome of differentiation and globalization theory remains in danger of being a mere prolongation of the axioms of differentiation theory.

At this point, we arrive at similar problems from different starting points: While world polity research is well prepared for the analysis of global isomorphism but has only started to deal with global field analysis, systems theory is well prepared for the analysis of fields but struggles with adjusting to globalization analysis. As a result, both approaches have failed to theorize the globalization dynamics of specific fields with sufficient depth, the effect of which is that neither theory has been able to explain how

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<sup>6</sup> An insight that was not lost on anthropologists interested in network expansion either: „A scholar of Ugric languages wishing to discuss his latest paper on the structure of conditional clauses cannot go next door: like the lonely whales of Antarctica searching for a mate, he must seek a suitable partner for his task widely through the seas of society“ (Barth 1978: 168).

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that Stichweh has outlined a theory of world society in which functional systems are only one, although the most important, of several "eigenstructures" of world society such as organizations, markets, networks and epistemic communities which mutually enhance each other in the genesis of world society (e.g. 2000, 2007). However, we suspect that a systems theoretical approach to globalization may be used to greater advantage if the main thesis on functional differentiation – suggesting a historical nexus of functional differentiation and emergence of world society – is theoretically reframed and historically tested before resorting to a list of further structures.

otherhood has become such a powerful engine of the globalization of (and by) fields in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

On this basis, let us sum up the main convergences and most interesting common difficulties of world polity research and world society theory: (1) Globalization analysis may start with the “ironic” insight that the dynamic development of world culture particularly in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century is largely a product of *observation* – as opposed to action and mere network relations; (2) the power of observation is produced by *others* specializing on the construction and theorization of actions and (3) relying on *otherhood*, i.e. institutions which reproduce the *difference* between actors and observers by producing modern forms of *actorhood* (such as nation states, formal organizations of multiple kinds, and individuals), producing and legitimating the role of mere observers in the process; (4) institutionalization of otherhood is an integral part of *broader field or system dynamics* within which it affects and is affected by other internal and external processes of global fields; (5) the integration in field analyses implies a shift of focus from pure isomorphism to the conditions of *constant change* and competition within differentiation processes of a field; (6) consequently, an important unresolved problem of this ironic strand of globalization theory is *to account for the double role of otherhood as a driving force of global isomorphism as well as of the continuous production of differences within a globalizing field*: Why have observers, not actors, become the main agents of the globalization of fields? How does otherhood enable and influence the dynamics and differentiation of a field? The following sections will give a preliminary answer to these questions, claiming that the dynamics of otherhood can (partly) be explained by the emergence and reproduction of specialized *publics* which enhance the continuous differentiation *and* globalization of fields.

### 3. Public otherhood

John Meyer derives the term “others” from Mead’s (1934) discussion of “significant others” and the “generalized other” without paying much attention to the distinction between the two. Applications to phenomena such as consulting often seem to suggest that “rationalized others” are primarily *significant* others, i.e. reference groups that shape actors’ perceptions of norms and proper conduct. Considering the wide array of organizations acting as concrete counsellors for actors, such concrete, organized forms

are certainly an important part of otherhood. However, that should not disabuse us from the fact that such “significant” rationalized others themselves gain their legitimacy from representing universal models. Even in the absence of concrete consulting relationships, actors are subject to a “generalized” form of otherhood. It is useful to conceive of this particular, most encompassing type of otherhood in terms of *public communication*. This definition is predicated upon the view that public communication is a *specific form of communication* in its own right.

According to its German origins (and different from its Latin ones), public means “open” and “accessible to an indefinite number of indefinite others” or, more generally, “observable by everybody” (cf. Hölscher 1978). On this etymological basis public communication can be defined as a form which addresses an indefinite number of anonymous observers. The literature regularly assumes that this form of communication is a more or less automatic result of the increasing use of media technologies such as the printing press or electronic media. Hence, sociologists and media historians in the tradition of Innis, Ong, Eisenstein or McLuhan have tended to underestimate the cultural conditions of this form, or they have, following Jürgen Habermas’ study on the civil “public sphere” (Habermas 1962/1990), tended to conceive of it in primarily normative terms (e.g. Calhoun 1992). Of course, this thinking is not simply wrong. Without media technologies and a normative basis, communication processes wouldn’t have developed the capacity of addressing anonymous others and installing a specifically modern sense of fictionality, rationality and historicity. Nevertheless, public communication is also a particular form of communication or discourse with complex conditions of its own.

Literary historian Michael Warner has made some important contributions to the understanding of these conditions, first in historical studies on the emergence of public opinion in east coast America in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, then by comparing public communication with somewhat related but different forms such as rumours, poetry or religious sermons (Warner 1990, 2002).<sup>8</sup> Of these comparisons, a comparison with a common understanding of lyric poetry is particularly helpful: Lyric poetry, too,

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<sup>8</sup> The essential difference between Warner’s and Habermas’ view is that Habermas conceives of the public sphere as bringing an universal human capacity of reason and rationality to political effect whereas Warner asks how the emerging cultural concepts of public opinion such as “printedness” participated in

addresses a distant public of indefinite readers, but *as poetry* it addresses the individual sensitivity of its readers. Consequently, a text framed as lyric poetry somewhat denies the anonymity and indefiniteness of the public it addresses, whereas it is exactly this indefiniteness which constitutes the specific meaning of public communication. As Warner puts it: “Public speech differs from both lyric and sermonic eloquence *by construing its addressee as its circulation*, not its private apprehension” (Warner 2002: 84).<sup>9</sup> We may think of alternative framings of poetry, of course, but the example already shows that communication may happen “in the public (sphere)” without necessarily meeting the definition of public communication. In this respect, poetry (which *doesn't* meet the more narrow definition of public communication) seems to differ from literary criticism (which *does* meet it) in a similar way as political decisions differ from their discussion and evaluation in the political public sphere or economic transactions differ from their observation and evaluation on economic markets.

There is an important lesson to be drawn from this argument regarding the role of public communication processes within (global) social fields: it allows grounding the very *distinction* between acting and observing operations in a long-term historical analysis of fields.<sup>10</sup> Of course, the historical role model here is the modern political system, whose emergence coincided with two complementary notions of the public, the governmental “public authority” and the non-governmental “public opinion” (e.g. Habermas 1962/1990; Baker 1990, Thompson 1995: 134ff.). Whereas the Latin roots of the former point to the overall community affected by certain decisions (“*res publica*”), the German roots of the latter point to the unlimited openness, accessibility and perceptibility of things or utterances (“*offen*”, “*allgemein zugänglich*”). Consequently, both notions tend to be associated with different antonyms – private vs. secret – , a fact that seems to befuddle the philosophical literature until today (cf. Geuss 2002). Obviously, it is the second meaning associated with unlimited accessibility that is at the heart of the concept suggested by Warner, but it is important to note that it can acquire that meaning only by

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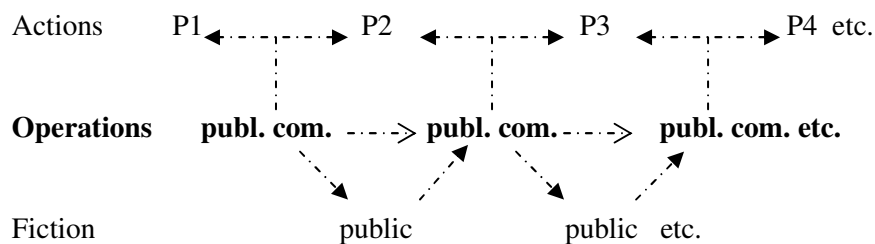
the invention of this very capacity. With Habermas, rationality is given and only needs to come out; with Warner, rationality is invented under specific historical/institutional conditions.

<sup>9</sup> In Michael Warner’s words: “A public” exists only “by virtue of being addressed”, and this very “circularity is essential to the phenomenon. A public might be real and efficacious, but its reality lies in just this reflexivity by which an addressable object is conjured into being in order to enable the very discourse that gives it existence.” (Warner 2002: 67).

<sup>10</sup> This distinction of levels of operations and these insights in the importance of “mere observation” and “otherhood” often seem to get lost in institutional analysis, especially when drawing on bottom-up-arguments or adapting Giddens’ concept of structuration (e.g. DiMaggio 1988, 1991).

being *distinguishable* from the political or, more generally, social meaning which constitutes its object of observation.

To sum up, two core elements of the concept may be distinguished: First, publics are communication processes/discourses that depend on the *fiction of a public consisting of an indefinite number of anonymous others*. Secondly, publics are *secondary* processes in that they distinguish themselves from primary processes which they observe, compare and evaluate as actions, performances or achievements. Combining these two elements and emphasizing their overall function within fields, they may also be called *public memories* that, starting in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, provide social systems/fields with increasingly complex capacities of public self-observation (cf. Werron 2007). In a graphical illustration the resulting social process may look like this – the point being that, in a reversal of action-theoretical thinking, the identity of “actions” or “performances” is dependent on being produced by processes of public communication:



This concept is already close to the institutionalist understanding of otherhood: Just like the “others”, publics (1) observe actors rather than acting themselves, (2) they do so by theorizing actions and performances, and (3) they produce and rely on the *distinction* between acting and observing operations, between taking and theorizing responsibility. In contrast to the purely neoinstitutionalist others, however, publics may also help explain how otherhood contributes to the continual production of differences in global fields.<sup>11</sup> The concluding section of the paper will try to add some more substantial arguments to this claim, asserting that the dynamics of otherhood can (partly) be explained by the emergence and reproduction of *specialized publics* which enhance the continuous differentiation *and* globalization of fields.

<sup>11</sup> For related ideas on a more radical discourse-analytical framework for institutional analysis see Phillips/Malhotra 2008.

#### 4. Disembedding – Media – Decoupling

##### *Disembedding*

Any attempt to explain the global production of differences in global fields must account for the *disembedding* of these fields from their societal or cultural environment. We use disembedding, a term coined by Karl Polanyi and Anthony Giddens, as a proxy for the German term “Ausdifferenzierung”, which refers to the relative autonomy of macro systems such as the economy. Analyzing global fields (also) as products of public communication forces us to take a closer look at the diverse forms of public communication which accompanied the emergence of the modern economy, politics, art, science, education, sports and other “disembedded” domains since the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century. Public communication, although defined as addressing an *indefinite* number of indefinite others, can convey highly *specific* meaning to highly differentiated publics (see Tarde 1901/1969 for early observations of these publics, as opposed to the undifferentiated “mass”). In other words, public communication is the most *general* as well as a possibly highly *specific* mode of communication, and it is due to this trait that it is capable of contributing to the disembedding of fields from local, regional or national contexts as well as to the re-embedding of these fields within a wider world societal context.

Usually, disembedding refers to how economic transactions free themselves from both social and spatial limitations, such as normative restrictions on what can be traded or territorial demarcations of markets. However, already in the case of the economy the picture would be incomplete without those specialized publics that enabled and stimulated the sharing and comparison of information about product qualities, prices and competitors. Economic transactions had been more or less global in the form of trading patterns for centuries, but global economic integration requires more than trade. It requires that relevant information is shared in a way that it makes it mandatory to base economic decisions primarily on economic information. In this view, economic theorization as a condition of the disembedding of the economic field starts with basic schemes such as prices or product categories that allow for the “commensuration” (Espeland/Stevens 1998) of formerly unique or incomparable products and lead to increasingly complex and abstract models such as market statistics or neoclassical concepts of the market. In the process, schemes of a more audio-visual, narrative or

statistical kind complement one another to form global markets that define and affect the “rationality” of economic action.

A recent “global history” of a chocolate brand (“Stollwerck”) in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century gives a nice historical illustration of this logic by showing how the disembedding within a globalizing market of similar and comparable products lead to the emergence and imagery of the “product brand” – in contrast to preceding forms such as the “firm brand” or the “factory brand” which were tied to the local conditions of production or personal trust in the producer (cf. Epple 2007). Thus, unlike Marion Fourcade’s analysis of the economic field cited above, “practical” economic processes and “professional” economic knowledge here do no longer appear as separate, “dialectically” coupled parts of the field; rather, all kinds of public economic knowledge from prices to brands to neoclassical theories appear as equal contributors to a centuries-old process of disembedding of the economic field.

Consider another example: the emergence of modern competitive sport in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Modern sports developed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in a relatively short time span – roughly between the late 1850s and 1900 – from local roots in Great Britain and the United States to the modern world sport as we know it today. It did so not primarily because certain classes started to imprint their morals on athletics or because athletes began to organize themselves in clubs and associations (as most historians would put it, cf. Eisenberg 1999). Instead, a new alliance of sporting press and telegraph network allowed for the comparisons of contests in new narratives and statistics such as tables, records or rankings which in turn enhanced the standardization of rules and the continuous organization of contests in new formats such as league systems, world events and hierarchal orders (for details see Werron 2008, 2009). These interdependent innovations opened the world of modern sports for an unlimited number of competitors and observers, highlighted in the 1880s by the idea of world-wide simultaneous competition in absence that was expressed in novel institutions and schemes such as “world championships” or “records”.

Following up on the aforementioned critique of systems theory it should be noted that this process wasn’t just a matter of specialization on certain communication codes or programmes. More specifically, it was dependent on *expanding the scope of comparison*

in such a way that it became able to integrate any single “local” contest within the wider context of a “global” sport/discipline. Therefore, the emergence of modern sport is a product of public otherhood with the “rationalized others” mainly represented by early sporting journalists and sports writers who invented the tables, records, statistics, legends and other narratives that, in a nice metaphor suggested by a sport historian, have become the “mortar” of which modern sports are held together (Tygiel 2000: 15). In the process, the modern notion of “sport” emerged as a relatively autonomous field with a specific “ecology” within which competitors, audiences, coaches, organizers, officials and even different sports/disciplines observe, compete with and copy each other in technical, tactical or regulatory respects. Just as in the case of economic markets, a circular relationship of public theorization, continual production of events and isomorphization or commensuration of events was established that institutionalized the field of sport as an increasingly global producer of differences.

As these examples suggest, this approach opens the view for historical perspectives and comparisons that have been largely ignored in institutional analysis.<sup>12</sup> Particularly, it is able to analyze historical processes since the 18<sup>th</sup> century within an encompassing constructivist framework that may help see the historical continuities as well as the discontinuities in the development of world polity in more detail. Analyzing basic schemes such as “prices” and “records” on a continuum with more abstract ways of theorization such as neoclassical theories points to a continuity-of-theorization that may have expanded profoundly in scope and complexity over the 20<sup>th</sup> century but has preserved its main characteristics: the dependence on forms of public self-observation and media technologies, the basic difference of acting and observing, and the trend towards disembedding and difference production in autonomous fields. In other words: If we conceive of public theorization as an integral part of the emergence of any modern (economic, scientific, political, artistic etc.) field, differences between basic models of theorization and more abstract models created by experts or professions become a difference of degree rather than principle.

This explanation of the disembedding of fields may also explain why it is so hard to decide (and so easy to disagree) whether differentiation leads to the making of world

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<sup>12</sup> For a similar critique regarding the research on economic regulation see Schneiberg/Bartley (2008: 52).

society – as systems theory argues – or more general world cultural expectations shape the differentiation in fields – as institutionalists would have it (cf. Thomas 2004). Our analysis implies that there is no clear-cut answer to this question, as public communication can operate as a driving force of differentiation of fields *as well as* a general form shaping the embeddedness or re-embedding of these fields in the wider social or cultural environment. Therefore, our argument does not take side with either theory. Rather, it urges both approaches to study the historical conditions of the disembedding *and* embeddedness of global fields in more detail.

### *Media*

Disembedding is bound up with the emergence of modern media technologies which, as noted above, should not be reduced to technological determinism or to a relationship with a separate mass media system. In order to render communication and comparison across locales possible technological means of propagating and storing information are necessary. For instance, modern sports were based on reports in highly specialized sporting papers rather than in the mass press and only later found their way into the daily newspapers. Similarly, disembedding and globalization of the modern economy particularly took off when product and pricing information became more quickly available, notably after the introduction of the telegraph (cf. Carey 1989; O'Rourke/Williamson 2002). In both cases, we observe that the respective fields use the same technologies (telegraphy, radio and TV broadcasting, internet) but very specific publics emerge, including proprietary codes and journals.

These historical lessons can be extended to other societal domains, using it for a deeper understanding of globalization processes since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. In particular, such research may help correct a questionable tendency in systems theory, where everything which is said, written and broadcasted by electronic media tends to be reduced to operations of a separate mass media system (as, e.g., in Luhmann 1996). In contrast to such hasty classifications, we propose to think of each functional system depending on a public memory of its own which cannot be reduced to a mass media or journalistic system, even if we assume that such a system indeed exists. As already mentioned earlier, political public opinion and economic markets were probably the earliest examples of such public memories that emerged long before typical criteria of news

selection where established which may justify assuming the existence of a separate mass media system. Analogous levels of public self-observation emerged in other macro systems of society as well, and all these public memories developed a peculiar sense of meaning, relevance and history without which any explanation of these systems would be incomplete.

Rather than elaborating on the rather obvious effects of mass media in terms of the public availability of information, we would like to point out how differentiated publics contribute to institutionalization. This is particularly relevant since neo-institutionalism has not developed an adequate account of the role of media in processes of institutionalization either. Institutions involve a certain degree of ‘taken-for-grantedness’ or more precisely: the *assumption* of taken-for-grantedness.<sup>13</sup> That is, institutions involve unquestioned assumptions about what others consider to be normal or ‘proper’ or even effective ways of action. Luhmann (1970) elaborates on this intuitive understanding of institutionalization by pointing out that institutions presuppose the consensus of *absent* others and thus necessarily stipulate more common knowledge and consensus than could actually be verified. This form of ‘credit’ makes institutions strong on the one hand (by discouraging objections) and weak on the other (by exposing them to sudden demise in the face of empirical dissent). Interestingly, the media obviously contribute to both dimensions: By creating anonymous publics, the media create a huge pool of anonymous others to whose expectations institutions may refer. Since it is impossible to verify claims about the expectations held by an infinite, anonymous public, the problem of consensus is thus temporalized: It becomes decisive to which degree institutions are supported by subsequent public communication.

Both affirmative communication and non-communication can underwrite institutions, but they are quite easily exposed to contrary evidence such as the ‘McKinsey’-effect, too. The modern mass media’s loquacity seems to make them more plausible candidates for subverting institutions rather than contributing to them. Yet despite the ubiquity of conflict and ‘backstage’ interest in the general mass media, the usage of media technologies in differentiated publics significantly contributes to institutionalization as well. Firstly, they create the fiction of an unknown public whose interests and

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<sup>13</sup> For qualifying remarks on this important aspect see Jepperson (1991: 147).

expectations must be taken into account. That makes it necessary to resort to more or less universalistic rules since there is no knowledge about more particular expectations. Secondly, there are field-specific publicity pressures, such as the ‘ad hoc’ statements of publicly listed companies, which enforce standardized ways of communication such as the usage of statistics and particular measures. In other words, media do first of all institutionalize *how* information is conveyed. On one level that concerns the basic operation within systems: Companies publish prices for their products, scientists publish in scholarly journals, and political parties publicize their decision in carefully staged conventions. On another level, however, the availability of such information creates a second-order demand for information about how such information is obtained. Publicity thus encourages calls for an abstract ‘transparency’, and a whole set of others specializes in collecting and publicizing such second-order information about corporate balances, good governance and performance indicators in particular sectors.

Again, it is the historical scope of the argument that makes it particularly interesting for institutional analysis. For instance, against this background it is surely more than a coincidence that the growth of world polity since the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century largely parallels the history of the electronic media, from the telegraph in the 1850s to the wireless in the early 1900s to television after 1945 to the internet in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is also more than a coincidence that the development of international governmental organizations (IGOs) can be divided into three phases (for this distinction see Murphy 1994) each of which started with the creation of a new organization for the coordination of media communication, from the “International Telegraph Union” (1865) to the “Radiotelegraph Union” (1906) to the “International Telecommunications Satellite Organization” (1964). The accelerated diffusion of world polity now also appears as driven by electronic media that pushed the theorization of global models – particularly by enabling and circulating new forms of public communication.

### *Decoupling*

There is an important flipside to the publicizing efforts fuelling (and being fuelled by) disembedding and the media: The more public otherhood in the form of constant, even if fictitious, observation is reflected in the actors’ self-presentations the more opens a gap between what is publicly communicated and what is actually done. While formal

structures such as models of democracy, administrative procedures and organizational technologies are heavily globalized and continue to spread across the world, they frequently only affect the *surface* of social reality. Since global expectations – mainly of Western origin – are often ill-adapted to local conditions elsewhere but at the same time the backbone of various forms of membership in world society, they can only be served in a hypocritical manner: Individuals, organizations and states subscribe to global norms but fail to live up to them in practice. States have ministries of education that participate in global conferences and develop curricula – but cannot provide chairs, writing desks or books. They also subscribe to international conventions such as the UN Declaration of Human rights – but are unable to ensure that their local civil servants and police officers adhere to them (Hafner-Burton/Tsutsui 2005).

The divergence between formalistic public appearance and actual informal practices can often be interpreted from an interactionist perspective using Goffman's (1990 [1956]) distinction between *front stage* and *backstage regions*: Norms prevailing backstage do not only sit uneasily with official protocol and formal norms and thus need to be protected from public view (cf. Holzer 2006).<sup>14</sup> There also are particular *audiences* for relating to those stages: The front stage, in this conception, is geared towards global audiences and detached observers, such as consultants, foreign experts and professions. Conversely, the backstage relates to closely-knit local audiences with particular expectations and exigencies.<sup>15</sup> For instance, schools follow curricula that are quite similar around the world, but of course that does not mean that the same things are taught. And particularly: not taught the same way. Methods of teaching differ substantially, be it for material reasons (e.g., no books or desks) or because of different conceptions of knowledge acquisition, for instance between those that exclude corporal punishment and those that include it. Yet even in the latter case: If foreign experts come to visit, the canes are quickly put away. Thus it is very difficult for outside observers even to *know* about this kind of practice. When they arrive, everything seems to work according to official protocol and formal structures. This kind of separation between front stage and backstage is the source of the *simultaneous* increase in uniformity on the

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<sup>14</sup> A similar idea drawing on James Scott's (1990) distinction of "public transcripts" and "hidden transcripts" is suggested (not yet elaborated) in Schneiberg/Clemens (2006).

<sup>15</sup> The term 'local' in this context has a functional rather than a strictly spatial reference, indicating chances for mutual familiarities, with spatial delimitation yielding opportunities for mutual knowing and trust being the most obvious, but not the only possibility.

one hand and diversity on the other: While the former is geared towards global audiences supporting universal models and scandalizing deviation, the latter flows from the adaptation to local audiences and their (presumed) expectations.

With regard to our argument on publics it is interesting to note that decoupling too needs to adapt to *field-specific* public communication, creating field-specific forms of decoupling. Since the realms of global and local audiences are not neatly differentiated *per se*, to increase uniformity and variation simultaneously requires constant ‘boundary work’ depending on the expectations created in specialized publics. For instance, the protagonists in a formal democracy, being under constant observation by other states, international mass media and NGOs, need to make sure that some minimum requirements, such as universal suffrage and reasonably free elections, are met. Similarly, a transnational corporation may be willing to bribe local officials but won’t expose that intention in its marketing concept. Artists may use their personal networks to outrival competing artists but won’t try to convince art publics and critics of the quality of their work by referring to those networks. Athletes may buy and use performance enhancers, but they won’t show off with it in the public. Each of these public spheres creates not only specific expectations regarding proper actorhood but also specific forms of deviance that depend on the actor’s ability to anticipate, openly accept and covertly negate the field-specific expectation of others. Since the institutions installed by public procedures may not be able to guarantee either the efficacy or the legitimacy of decisions, traditional institutions and particularistic networks need to be maintained and adapted accordingly. Since rationalized others usually do not have the means to extensively verify the extent to which formal structures are decoupled or not, they themselves tend to overestimate the degree of uniformity that they produce. However, bearing in mind what we said before about institutionalization, precisely that belief in what others believe to be true is a sound basis for institutionalization.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper we have tried to extend and elaborate the neoinstitutionalist notion of “otherhood” by relating it to specialized publics and the attending forms of publicity in societal fields. If we conceive of otherhood in terms of observation rather than action it is an element of the emergence of a particular genre of public communication that

focuses on observing, evaluating and memorizing actions and decisions. Just like rationalized others, publics construct actors rather than acting themselves and they do so by producing, comparing, evaluating and theorizing models of proper actorhood. Yet in contrast to the purely neoinstitutionalist others a concept of publics may contribute to an *explanation of why and how otherhood has become such a dominating force in the making of world society*, the key idea being that public communication is not just a way of sharing information and discussing arguments but also *a particular form of communication and institutionalization*. Drawing on Warner's work on the emergence of public opinion in east-coast America in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and his later studies on "publics and counterpublics" (cf. Warner 1990, 2002) we have discussed the historical prerequisites and consequences of this form of public communication in three respects: First, we have argued that publics are conditions and results of the 'disembedding' of specialized operations and discourses based on functional differentiation; such discourses are, second, related to the development of media technologies, which on the one hand significantly increased the 'publicity' necessary for observation and evaluation, and on the other hand contributed to the institutionalization of field-specific norms and standards by fostering and enforcing the assumption that an indefinite number of indefinite others is simultaneously informed at the very moment of publication; third, disembedding from local contexts and pressures for publicity create a particular form of decoupling: anticipating the expectations of others (or: the public as a whole) more attention is paid to the 'staging' of appropriate conduct and its recording in what Scott calls 'public transcripts', while 'backstage' activities not in line with those expectations are hidden and thereby often protected from pressures for standardization.

The most important advantage of a closer analysis of publics is that it allows us to investigate the dynamics and changing historical conditions of otherhood, particularly by analyzing the complex historical correlations with *media technologies*. From a communication theoretical point of view, the absence of media analyses is probably the most glaring omission in world polity research. Yet we submit that the role of the media should not be reconstructed from a technology-focused perspective but regarding the particular forms of communication and institutionalization it enables, including, most notably, a sharper distinction between acting and observing which is captured in John Meyer's rationalized others. Our arguments point to a more specific concept of otherhood which preserves the insights in the importance of theorization and

simultaneously tackles the problem how these reflexive capacities actually enable the globalization dynamics of global fields. By adopting these arguments world polity research and world society theory could establish a fruitful cooperation in the work on an “ironic” theory of globalization.

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