

Differentiation of Society (*Differenzierung der Gesellschaft*)

The primary →*differentiation* of society is the formation of subsystems and system/environment relationships. The form of the primary differentiation is the →*structure* of society.

The form of the differentiation determines the way in which relationships between the subsystems are realized in the overall system: it concerns the difference between systems that belong to each other's environments. The form of differentiation creates the structure of society because it determines an ordering of the relationships between the subsystems that preselects the possibilities of communication. In this way, it determines the limits of the →*complexity* that society can reach. If complexity exceeds these limits, society continues to reproduce only once the form of the differentiation changes. The form of the primary differentiation is thus subject to evolutionary variation when exposed to the pressure of increasing complexity. With each new form of differentiation, a new maximum level of complexity is determined.

The forms of differentiation of society can themselves be differentiated according to how the boundaries are drawn between the subsystems and their environments. They result from the combination of two distinctions: (a) the distinction system/environment, and (b) the distinction similarity/dissimilarity regarding the relations between the subsystems. During the evolution of society, four forms of differentiation have served as structures: the differentiation into similar subsystems (segmentation); the differentiation of center/periphery; the hierarchical differentiation into strata; and functional differentiation.

Segmentary differentiation is the form that arose in archaic societies following an initial phase of differentiation according to sex and age. The subsystems in a segmentary society are similar according to the principle of differentiation: this principle is descent (subsystems are tribes, clans or families) or

residence (subsystems are households or villages). In addition, the segmentation can be repeated within the primarily differentiated subsystems (families in tribes, households in villages).

In a segmentally differentiated society, complexity cannot reach particularly high levels: each subsystem can only observe other equal systems in the environment internal to society, and society overall has only limited selectivity. In this society, the observation of the world is always based on the difference familiar/unfamiliar, with the systematic need to ascribe everything to familiarity. All communication takes place as face to face interactions, because no medium exists through which absent addressees can be reached [*→Dissemination Media*]. The conceptual heritage of society [*→Semantics*] is transmitted orally. The norm of reciprocity fulfills the function of maintaining internal relations whereas magic fulfills the function of maintaining external relations.

The change in the structure of society begins with a collapse of the norm of reciprocity. Through contact between different groups and internal changes, differences in wealth and rank between families emerge, so that reciprocity is no longer possible.

The societies formed as a result of this process, combine the principles of kinship (from descent) and territorial control (from residence). This combination is based on the priority of one of the two principles formed in the previous form of differentiation. The principle of territoriality leads to the differentiation of center and periphery. The principle of kinship leads to the hierarchical differentiation into social strata. In both of these new forms of differentiation, the subsystems are dissimilar with regard to the formative principle (territory or kinship). The structural change is mitigated by the simultaneous maintenance of segmentary differentiation outside the center or the higher stratum.

The center/periphery differentiation has a hierarchical form based on the distinction civilized/uncivilized. Communication originating in the civilized center is dominant throughout the territory occupied by society. Inequality is based on the different residence, either in the center or in the periphery. Both the ancient cities and the large empires that emerged from segmentation show this form of differentiation, as power and bureaucracy are located in the center. The problem with this form of differentiation is the lack of contacts between center and periphery. The exercise of centralized power is therefore very limited. The center is a kind of island in society.

In the center, a new form of differentiation can also develop and become dominant: stratification based on the dominion of an upper stratum, i.e. aris-

tocracy. An important example regards Europe between the late Middle Ages and the seventeenth century. This new form of differentiation is based on stratification in the center, while segmentation continues to be reproduced in the periphery. Stratification is the clearest example of the hierarchy principle, according to which the subsystems of society have unequal rank. Inequality arises with the closure of the upper level (the aristocracy) through endogamy, i.e. forbidding marriage outside of the stratum. Stratification means unequal distribution of resources and opportunities for communication between the upper stratum (aristocracy) and the lower stratum (common people).

Within the hierarchy principle, in stratified societies relations between subsystems always refer to rank. The upper level determines the internal order of society through inequality. Equality, on the other hand, regulates communication within the strata, for instance in the form of equality between aristocratic families. Stratification means, therefore, equality within a framework of inequality. The internal equality within the upper level of society, which does not necessarily mean cooperation, ensures limited access to the available resources: equality is limited to the few, because only a small number of families can benefit from the resources. The internal equality within the upper stratum, however, is also limited, as further differentiation can develop within the strata.

Since the upper level of society accumulates the capacity for selection, stratification allows the emergence of higher complexity, if compared with earlier structures. The important conceptual heritage is produced in the upper level of society, as the ability to write is exclusive to this level, while the lower level is occupied with the day-to-day problems of survival. It is, thus, the upper level that produces the *→self-description* of society.

Stratification produces a clear and overt order that makes further evolutionary changes probable. It is therefore no coincidence that in Europe in the eighteenth century, when complexity became too great for the stratification, a new structural change gets under way. Differentiation by autopoietic subsystems oriented to a single function appears. It breaks down the hierarchical order of stratification and is today characteristic of *→world society*.

In this functionally differentiated society, the subsystems are dissimilar from the perspective of the function fulfilled by each one. Each subsystem is differentiated according to its specific function in society: the primary differentiated subsystems are the political system, the economic system, the legal system, the scientific system, the education system, mass-media, the system of families, the system of religion, the medical system and the art system.

The most important communication in society is structured according to the functions of these systems.

Every function is fulfilled autonomously by a subsystem. Every subsystem hypostatizes the primacy of its own function. Thus, every subsystem observes society from the perspective of its own function. Each subsystem is guided by a binary distinction [*→Code*] that tolerates no interference in the fulfillment of the function from outside. In each subsystem, the code rejects the distinctions of other subsystems, but also accepting their relevance to the overall society. In the economic system, for instance, the orientation to scientific truth is rejected, but the relevance of science for society is accepted. Using a concept introduced by logician Gotthard Günther, the functionally differentiated society can be defined as polycontextural: many codes are valid at the same time, although they all mutually reject one another.

The relationships between the functions are not ordered hierarchically at the level of society as a whole; the dissimilarity between the systems is, therefore, no longer based on hierarchy. Despite the dissimilarity between the functions and each system hypostatizing its own function, society has no center and no top. All functions must be fulfilled, as they are essential for society; therefore, no function can have primacy over the others. An additional consequence of this is that self-description of society from a single perspective (the center or the top) is impossible.

In the functionally differentiated society, the subsystems observe the world neither uniformly (as in the segmentary society) nor dogmatically (as in the stratified society). The differentiation system/environment has a different meaning depending on the observing subsystem. Every functional system is operationally closed [*→Operation/Observation*] and produces selections according to its own distinctions. Every subsystem tolerates a very complex environment on the condition that the other functions are also fulfilled. Compared with earlier societies, redundancy is reduced and variety is increased [*→Redundancy/Variety*]. The problems of society as a whole are processed in every subsystem, each of which produces its own typologies and solutions. Thus, in the different functional systems, the most important problems of society are processed simultaneously. Facts, events and problems are generalized through their specification in the operationally closed subsystems. The increase in complexity compared with earlier societies emerges from this priority-free versatility of observation.

Each subsystem can observe not only society, but also other subsystems. In this case, we talk about performance. Even though it primarily refers to its

function for society, every functional system must provide performance for the other subsystems. For instance, in the political system, laws for the economy are enacted; in the economic system, scientific research is funded; in the education system, training is given for the purpose of work. This means that the functional systems not only necessarily operate autonomously, but they are also highly interdependent. Interdependencies have different meanings in different systems. For instance, the education system observes the political system differently than the legal system does; for the political system, these different perspectives are an environmental differentiation that is absent from the environments of the education system or the legal system.

Communicative events can also be identified by different subsystems as simultaneous operations [*→Interpenetration and Structural Coupling*]; for instance, entering into marriage is both a legal communication and a communication within the family (and perhaps a religious communication). However, the operational closure of the functional systems involved is never broken and in fact determines the continuation of internal communication: following the marriage ceremony, communication in the family is not oriented to laws, whilst the legal status of the spouse is not oriented to the question of love.

Apart from society and the other subsystems, a functional system can also observe itself through reflection [*→Self-Reference*], which enhances self-observation. The political system can describe itself, for instance, with the help of political theory, just as the education system can with the help of pedagogy. Every system, by drawing on reflection, accesses the possibility of observing itself as differentiated from the environment, i.e., of referring to other systems (society or other subsystems).

In order to be able to reproduce itself, every functional system must be able to differentiate and combine its function (for society), its performances (for other subsystems) and its reflection (of itself).

The functionally differentiated society is the first example of a world society: it includes all communications produced in the world without being limited by territorial discontinuity. In the pre-modern period, each society was defined in terms of territorial boundaries, beyond which other conditions for communication were valid. Today, however, the different functional systems (e.g., the economic system, the political system, the education system, the system of science) are not fulfilled only within territorial boundaries, but simultaneously throughout the whole world. The unity of society can no longer be defined through these territorial boundaries; the differences between the

geographical regions can only be observed in relation to the overarching functionally differentiated society, with the help of the distinction between developed and underdeveloped regions.

In the functionally differentiated society, stratification and segmentation do not disappear as patterns of differentiation. They are, however, no longer the primary forms of differentiation and therefore take on new meaning. Even when stratification is no longer a basic premise in society, it is constantly reproduced through the effects of functional differentiation, and actually strengthened as the differentiation in more or less overt social classes. Concerning segmentation, this reproduces itself in organizational forms [*→Organization*] that are dependent on functions: for instance, as the differentiation of nation states in the political system, companies in the economic system or schools in the education system.

Differentiation according to function widens and differentiates the horizon of possibilities available to each functional system, enriches the relationship between subsystems autonomy and interdependence, provokes variation in society, and raises the requirements for selectivity compared with earlier forms of differentiation. This implies both benefits and problems, because it causes very high levels of complexity in social and psychic systems. [*C.B.*]

Theory of Society (2013: Ch. 4.2-4.8]; Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik I (1980: Ch. 1); Einführung in die Theorie der Gesellschaft (2005: Ch. IV); Differentiation of Society (1982: 229-254, 390-394).