

World Society (*Weltgesellschaft*)

The expression world society means that there is only one →*society* in the entire world. The constitution of a world society is an effect of the →*evolution* of society. Until the sixteenth century there were very few systematic connections among different societies in the world. European colonization initiated the integration of these different societies by establishing regular communicative connections. The constitution of world society included all communication in one unique society, which in this way acquired unambiguous boundaries: the boundaries of communication in the world as a whole. The boundaries of society became independent of natural features, such as territorial conditions and physical presence. This happened with the birth and development of the functionally differentiated society [→*Differentiation of Society*] on the one hand, and, on the other, with the invention and systemization of new technologies that made communication simultaneously available in different places [→*Mass Media*].

With the constitution of functional differentiation, the unity of the societal system cannot be defined through territorial borders and the corresponding distinction between members and non-members. This form of society cannot be identified in terms of national political systems or regional territories, as the internally differentiated functional systems include all communications in the world. The world dimension of society is implied in every communication, regardless of its topic and the spatial distance between the participants. The world dimension of connections (and problems) is increased through →*organizations* that operate and cooperate worldwide (e.g., enterprises, universities, healthcare organizations). Functional systems and their organizations operate without regional boundaries.

World society stimulates the need for →*self-description*, which cannot be provided on the basis of individual experiences or specialized interactions (e.g., in the upper strata of society). In world society, self-descriptions reach

a high level of abstraction, and this also enhances a theory of reflection in society about society, tentatively provided by sociology. Moreover, world society provides a new description of the *→world*, so that the description of the modern, acentric world is produced by the modern, acentric society.

Against this background, however, the segmentation of the *→political system*, based on the formation of nation states, determines a regional differentiation of world society. This regional differentiation is an effect of functional differentiation, in particular of the segmentary political system of states. The effect of this segmentation is to amplify the unequal distribution of functional differentiation in different regions of the world. This leads to the description of the world as more or less modernized (or developed), depending on the region being observed. The regional description of world society continues to be reproduced as it accounts for this different level of regional development of functional differentiation. However, regional differences depend on the involvement in and the reaction to the dominant structures of world society, as functional differentiation combines and reinforces its effects in the world. Functional differentiation can also inhibit the generalization of its effects, depending on the different conditions occurring in different regions, and this generates different regional patterns of functional differentiation. This regionalization of functional differentiation brings about different opportunities for inclusion in world society, leading to conditions of exclusion from wealth, rights, democracy, medical care, education, and so on [*→Inclusion/Exclusion*]. Exclusion determines impoverishment of the population, prevents the regional establishment of functional differentiation, and generates the description of differences between a center and a periphery of world society. This situation also enhances forms of local particularism, contrasting with the universalism of world society, in particular as religious or ethnic movements develop within nation states.

It is not possible to say if regional differences and their effects will decrease or disappear in the future of world society. What is clear is that their existence does not determine limitations in the development of a world society. On the contrary, the differences among regions, and the possibility of comparing different regions, depend on the world dimension of the functionally differentiated society. In other words, the possibility of observing regional differences is based on the unity of society. Thus, by comparing different regions, regional problems can be understood as problems that depend on functional differentiation (e.g., problems of democracy or political instability,

economic deprivation or inequality, inadequate education, or lack of medical supplies).

Looking at the history of society, rather than simply at present regional differences, it is possible to observe an increasingly unified world society, highlighted by a large number of worldwide phenomena (e.g., dependence on technology, trends in education and scientific research, medical care needs, economic crises, international law, or pressure to democratize). Despite the production of regional differences, therefore, world society cannot be avoided or boycotted regionally, be it through political determination, autarchic attempts or ethnic and religious movements. Instead what happens is that different effects arise from the combination of the structures of world society on the one hand, and specific regional cultural conditions on the other. Looking at its future, rather than at its past or present, it seems evident that world society creates common problems everywhere, together with the need to face these problems. The temporal orientation [*→Time*] of society tends to shift from the past (societal identity) to the future (societal contingencies). It is evident that world society generates at the same time both the interest in cultural diversity, which depends on segmentation and unequal distribution, and the interest in common development, since describing the future of society means describing the necessity of dealing with problems which are common across the entire world. [C.B.]

Theory of Society (2012: Ch. 1.10).

