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The Societal Function of European Integration in the Context of World Society

This paper departs from the paradigm of “Differenzierung” but also invokes questions with relevance for the paradigms of evolution and self-description. The objectives of the paper are: i) to identify the societal function which is produced through European integration; ii) to indicate certain features of a theoretical model capable of describing the evolution of the integration phenomenon and iii) to gain a larger understanding of the EU’s self-description.

The starting point is an understanding of the EU as a hybrid structure operating in-between, on the one hand, the political and legal systems of the Member States, which are characterised by a strong element of segmentary differentiation, and, on the other hand, an increasingly globalized world society. Thus, the emergence and continued evolution of the EU can be understood as a reaction to a continued reduction in the “Problemlösungsfähigkeit” of nation-states, defined as constituted through the structural coupling between the political and legal systems within a segmented frame. From this perspective the EU is merely a compensating structure which has emerged because the “Tragfähigkeit” of the nation-states has been increasingly undermined.

But when viewed as an autonomous phenomenon (or maybe as an “Eigenstructure”) the EU can also be understood as a transformative structure, which deploys two partly contradictory strategies. Firstly, the operations of the EU are oriented towards the systematic breakdown of social structures characterised by segmented (and stratificatory) differentiation and the replacement of such structures with functionally differentiated structures. This form of substitution is achieved through a strategy of “negative integration”, which essentially is aimed at de-constructing Member States through de-

regulation. As a result, e.g. in current debates on the future of the national welfare regimes in Europe, the EU is often being conceived as an external threat when observed from the different national contexts. Secondly, the EU produces “positive integration” through the construction of segmentary overlays, which are unfolded “on top” of already existing nation-state structures, thereby producing novel forms of “higher level segmentation” within a regional European frame.

It will be argued that the distinction between the strategies of negative and positive integration is helpful in order to understand the structural conditions on which the EU operates, since the co-existence of these strategies can be interpreted as a direct result of the EU’s status as a hybrid structure existing “in-between” the world society and the nation-states. Internally the hybrid structure produces permanent tensions. This can e.g. be observed through a “semantic divide”, in so far as the EU at the same time describes itself as the incarnation of cosmopolitanism and as a “Fortress Europe”.

From an evolutionary perspective the structural condition of hybridity is the central cause for the unexpected “turn to governance” within the EU. This turn stands in direct contrast to the EU’s original regulatory idea, which was the construction of a European State on the basis of the nation-state model. Hierarchical governing structures do, however, not correspond with the hybrid function of the EU and that is the reason why the EU has evolved into a heterarchical governance structure which is better equipped to bridge the gap between the nation states and the world society.

The above analysis will be conducted both with and against Luhmann’s oeuvre. Luhmann himself did not give much attention to the issue of regional integration and the attempts of other scholars to grasp the phenomenon in system theoretical terms have not been particularly fruitful. The paper does, however, support Luhmann’s claim, that in the modern world functional differentiation tends to gain in importance relatively to segmentary and stratificatory differentiation. However, the development in the European context shows that this process is more complex than described by Luhmann. Not only does Luhmann seem to assume that there is a certain automatism in the move towards increased functional differentiation. He also argues that segmentary and stratificatory structures are being replaced by functionally differentiated structures. As indicated above this is only partially the case, in so far as segmented structures are being reproduced at a

larger regional scale, and because functional structures merely tend to extrude but not to eradicate stratificatory structures. In contrast to the Luhmannian perspective, it remains possible to argue that the latter structures are surprisingly resistant. That is e.g. being illustrated by the continued strength of national legal and political structures and the continued reproduction of markedly different national legal and political cultures in the European context. Cultures which e.g. make it highly improbable that European political decisions and legal acts are incorporated in a coherent manner throughout the Member States. Instead EU actions are merely being “translated” when incorporated in the different national contexts. In the translating operations, the acts are provided with different meanings and significance in each national context. This illustrates that the European construction is nothing more than thin layer which has been imposed on extremely thick social structures, which have been densified through long historical processes.

The paper will be written and presented in English.

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