

# LUHMANN AND GLOBALIZATION

## The Interplay between nation, state and world society

By Ole Thyssen<sup>1</sup>

*Abstract:* In Luhmann's scheme of social systems, "society" is not, as in colloquial talk, the nation. As Luhmann defines social systems in only one dimension, communication, and as communications can easily connect to other communications across geographical borderlines, it is no wonder that the spatially defined nation is not occupying an important position in his theory. "Society" is the world society, the system of all communication. This inclusive system with no social counter-concept is differentiated in functional subsystems such as economy, politics and science which also are global in scope. Globalization is, by the choice of basic concepts, built into Luhmann's theory of social systems.

The concept of a nation, however, is ambiguous. It can, in a neutral sense, refer to a population inhabiting a delimited territory and subjected to a central power. And it can, in a normative sense, refer to a special kind of political self-description, nationalism, developing and flourishing in the period between 1789 and 1914. According to Luhmann, nationalism is a phase in the evolution of political self-descriptions. He considers the nationalistic semantics as outdated and unable to describe modern society.

It can be discussed whether Luhmann is correct in arguing that the nationalist semantics has lost its power. After 1989, it seems to be strengthening. Still, Luhmann's predilection for temporal as opposed to spatial descriptions makes him describe nations as mere geographical subdivisions of the world society. They may exploit irregularities in the functional subsystems but are theoretically unimportant.

Claiming the obsolescence of the nationalist semantics does not, however, imply a denial of the significance of the nation or its political representative, the state. Luhmann accepts that nations fulfill important political functions.

So a tension can be seen in Luhmann's theory of social systems. On one side, the world is globalized due to the dynamics of functional subsystems. On the other hand, nations are still the most important political actors. When Luhmann defines the state as "the self-description of the political system", he implicitly takes the point of view of the nation and, as a consequence, accepts a plurality of political systems. Following his theory design there should be only one global political system. Even if that may be analytically true, as all political actors connect to all political actors on the global scene, still there is no effective world state and no global political self-description.

Such irregularities call for a renewed systems theoretical analysis of the relation between nation, state and world society, showing that the dilemma between the global and the national perspective is not a real one. Functional subsystems, organizations and states are structurally coupled and together account for the dynamics of the world society. In the end of the paper it is argued that the problems of globalization may be analyzed as consequences of this coupling of three different kinds of social system having different goals, number of stakeholders, relations to time and space and responsibility for stakeholders, namely functional subsystems, private organizations and states. As no political agent is representing the tangled and hyper-complex political system as a whole, it is not possible to harmonize the problems arising from the anarchic interplay of the three systems. Creating second-order super nations such as EU would not solve the problems, but only rearrange them. This rather pessimistic perspective on the possibility of handling the problems of globalization is inherent in Luhmann's acrid statement in *Social systems*: survival depends on evolution, that is, chance.

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