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Functional Differentiation as a Key Signifier of Modernity. Reflections on the Reception of a Concept in Recent Historiography

In recent years, some elements and key terms of systems theory have found growing interest among historians of modern society, i.e. the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. One example is the concept of self-description, which ties in neatly with the programme of a historical semantics of modern societies since the “Sattelzeit” from 1750 to 1850, which Reinhart Koselleck has developed since the 1970s. Systems theory has also attracted the interest of historians working on the modern mass media. The theory of functional differentiation as another key element of “The Society of Society” has, however, not only been rarely discussed by historians, but has also been rejected out of hand. One example is Hans-Ulrich Wehler, who is himself devoted to the project of a history of modern German society which employs a four-tier concept of societal differentiation. Nevertheless, he has ridiculed the theory of functional differentiation as “historically naïve concept acrobatics”.

My paper will discuss the reasons for this situation. A first explanation should take decomposition and emergence as two different ways to describe functional differentiation into account. Whereas historians have had no problems to describe the decomposition of traditional, corporate institutions such as guilds, estates or early-modern towns since about 1800 as a functional differentiation, they struggle to conceptualise the development of the modern mass media, of competitive sports or of a non-realist art with their own, distinctive contexts as forms of emergent differentiation. Secondly, the reception of this theoretical approach has been hampered by the importance historians attribute to self-descriptions of modern society which are centered around class. The paper will discuss some reasons for this preference, also in terms of the apparent difficulties to imagine and represent functional differentiation. Thirdly, the paper will ask how the position of individuals in a regime of functional differentiation can be described, and if the concept of “governmentality” offers a fruitful perspective to analyse how the behaviour of individuals is and can be governed in modern society.

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