Another sociology for IR?
An analysis of Niklas Luhmann's conceptualisation of power

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Abstract

In the context of the present sociological turn in International Relations, this paper aims at relating theoretical discussions in International Relations to Niklas Luhmann's social theory. It proposes a dialogue through the analysis of power in Luhmann's theory, a concept which is often considered central in IR theorising. Given the frequently tautological use of power in social theory (and in particular in IR), many social theorists have tried to circumscribe the role of power in their theories. But Niklas Luhmann is one of the few *non-individualist* theoreticians who ends up having a very reduced role for power in his social theory.

This marginalisation of power in Luhmann's theory, so the argument of the paper, is the result of two theoretical decisions made together in his move to autopoiesis. First, Luhmann links power to one and only one social system, politics. Second, the political systems is considered equal to others, and hence the theory allows for a very different conceptualisation of hierarchy or stratification, one in which power as such plays little role.

Such a marginalisation is, however, not innocent. Whereas there are ample examples in IR of how one can fruitfully use his communicative concept, his autopoietic theory displays a perhaps unnecessarily technocratic and conservative bias. For the concept of power functions as an indicator of 'the art of the possible' and of responsibility. By defining power and politics as narrowly as he does, by its radical anti-'humanism', Luhmann's theory defines issues out of the reach of agency and politics and, by the same token, de-legitimates many attempts to question the status quo. A sketchy comparison with other post-structuralist social theories (Foucault and Bourdieu) sketches alternatives to such an approach.

Introduction

Given the recent sociological turn in International Relations (IR) theory, usually labelled 'constructivism', it is hardly surprising, if also more seemingly remote theories are joining the stage. And Niklas Luhmann's system theory might seem far-fetched in many respects. The theory is coming out of a functionalist tradition not exactly *en vogue* in the social

sciences or in IR in particular. Its radical anti-individualism is hardly mainstream. At the same time, however, Luhmann's theory has attracted an ever wider audience across sociological traditions – and not only in Germany, where it is simply something no social theoretician can afford to ignore. Hence, that it took so long for Luhmann to be discovered in IR has perhaps more to do with the rather difficult language and the sheer complexity of the theory than with a foregone judgment of its usefulness.

For there are good *prima facie* reasons for IR theoreticians to have a closer look at Luhmann's theory. First, Luhmann's theory very consciously and fundamentally deals with the question of reflexivity, crucial for constructivists (Guzzini 2000), but not only. His theory is based on operationally open, but self-referring social systems. As such, his theorising of self-reference and 'reflexivity' cuts across nearly all his theory in an extent unparalleled by another social theory. Second and relatedly, Luhmann insists in a parallel treatment of psychic and social systems. Hence, when analysing science, his theory will necessarily include a parallel treatment of knowledge and knowledge production, a sociological epistemology besides analysing how science has become, and functions as, a social system. His theory is perhaps the most extreme version of a sociological turn in social theory, there is.

Yet the enormous formalism of the theory hampers an easy access by the outsider. That makes it difficult to devise a strategy for a dialogue between Luhmann and IR. One way consists in looking at those passages where Luhmann explicitly relates his work to the 'international'. Since this has already been done elsewhere (Albert 1999), I will follow a different, though complementary, strategy.

The paper proposes to look at Luhmann's social theory by concentrating on one particular concept crucial for IR, namely power. Power has been chosen, since it is a concept considered fundamental in IR or classical political science – more so than for Luhmann – and yet still allows a manageable access to some of the potentials and limits of his social theory for IR theories. Hence, the following will try to unravel the content Luhmann gives to 'power' in his theory by linking it up with some conceptual discussions in IR. A caveat is due. Since the paper tries to read Luhmann through the eyes of an IR audience, referring – whether explicitly

or implicitly – to the present debates in IR, it is necessarily different, and perhaps inferior, to a purely hermeneutic re-reading of Luhmann in his own terms. As said, the purpose of this paper is another. It is not yet more of a starting point for establishing a theoretical dialogue.

The choice of Luhmann for analysing power is interesting insofar as he is perhaps the one social theorist who most radically reacted against the tautological use of power (in fact particularly frequent in IR!) and its ubiquity, by tightly circumscribing its role in his theory. This strategy is more common among individualist social theorists (Dowding 1991; 1996), whereas holists tend to look for a more encompassing power concept, or play with a series of related concepts like power and authority (see the discussion in Lukes 1979). Luhmann is the one holist who cuts power done like individualists.

Hence, the following analysis will be done in two steps. First, my argument will be to demonstrate the way Luhmann's social theory deliberately underplays the phenomenon of power. This will be shown by analysing the shifts in Luhmann's general theory which do not leave the concept of power untouched. Indeed, there are three concepts of power in Luhmann. The last reserves a very limited place to power. This is a very interesting theoretical choice, one which will meet the profound sympathy of many who ever tried to get a grip on the concept of power, I am sure. It is a choice that can, yet also needs to, be justified. A second part will try to argue that the theoretical justifications in Luhmann's theory do not seem so compelling. In a sketchy comparison with other social theories that share many of Luhmann's general premises – I will mention Foucault's theory of power and Bourdieu's field theory – in his final concept of power seems less appealing to this reader than his own intermediate communicative one.

I. Power as a medium of communication, or: how to eventually tie power to one system

It is not easy to summarise Luhmann's approach to power. For the major book, *Macht*, which was (little) revised in its second edition in 1988 (no preface, no new literature after 1975), is heir of a literature in social science

heavily influenced by approaches which are in tension to his functionalism and his later autopoietic system theory. Whether or not this indicates a radical shift in his theorising, reading the revised edition of 1988 seems to show that starting from his earlier writings, Luhmann could have gone also in a different direction than his *Social Systems.* It is on the basis of this internal tension that the article wants to problematise theoretical choices made by Luhmann in comparison with other social scientists who have faced somewhat similar theoretical problems.

But how can I say that Luhmann's theory underplays the phenomenon of power when he wrote a whole book, his first, about it (Luhmann 1975)? As I will argue, this move is the result of two theoretical decisions. First, Luhmann defines power as a medium of communication which, in his theoretical shift towards autopoiesis, is increasingly tied to one and only one social system, namely politics. Second, he moves away from classical stratification theories in sociology by levelling all social systems: the political system is removed from its prior or superordinate place.

None of these moves alone would diminish the importance of power, only both together. To the contrary, keeping only one of the two theoretical decisions would potentially *increase* the role of power in (and for) social theory. Hence, Luhmann's first move does not exclude a 'structural coupling' (see below) which privileges the conversion of power into other media (as actually discussed in Luhmann 1975: 101ff.). Also, his second move, if done alone, would result in something similar to Foucault's diffuse conceptualisation of power. Also this concept tries to capture the idea of 'power without the king' (Foucault 1977), but, as a result, tends to find power ubiquitous and exactly not tied to one system.

The two moves are played out in the three stages of his theorising of power which is throughout understood as a medium of communication – just that the theory in which it is embedded changes, and hence also the meaning of the concept. Such a conception is, of course, in the tradition of Talcott Parson's functionalism. And indeed, in a first phase Luhmann mixes functionalism with some ideas from the social exchange and community power literature in the US. A second, somewhat intermediate, phase then shifts to a purer communicative understanding of power, before the turn to an autopoietic system theory revises it again.

1. The interactionist-functionalist root of Luhmann's early concept of power

Luhmann bases his understanding of power mainly on the social exchange and community power literature, which was prominent then in the US (and to which he gives a communicative twist, see below). This is interesting, since this type of literature has an individualist understanding of social interaction and is therefore meta-theoretically incompatible with Luhmann's functionalist approach.

The basic inspiration of this literature is Max Weber's definition of power as getting somebody else to do something against his or her will. As a result, this literature defines power as a causal concept, but not of the earlier mechanic version (as e.g. Russell 1960 [1938]). Luhmann explicitly follows Dahl (1968) in taking 'will' or preferences seriously and hence this conceptualisation of power needs to refer to both individual and interactive preference rankings and foregone alternatives, i.e. sanctions and cost analysis. Moreover, power is also a multidimensional concept insofar as resources in one domain might be of little use in another. Moreover, Dahl would insist that power is a *relational*, not to be confused with a *relative,* concept.[1] In other words, power does not reside in capabilities or resources – which are just this: re-sources – but in the effect those can have in the relationship between actors. We can talk about power only if intention has been affected – in the extreme case: will has been broken – in a relationship. As such, power is, finally, a counterfactual concept, since it means that action has been affected which would have been different otherwise.

Dahl's concept has been fundamental for the so-called community power literature which is in many points at odds with functionalism à la Luhmann. This literature had been written as an open attack against elitist approaches, insisting on the empirical verifiability of power claims (Dahl 1958), something a functionalist approach would have difficulties to meet. Therefore, empirical studies had to be carried out in clearly delineating the issue areas where power would obtain – analyses which took the form of (empirically careful) decision-making studies (Dahl 1961; Polsby 1980).

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[1] The locus classicus is Blau 1964. For IR, see Baldwin (1978; 1989 [1971]).

Also, this literature is self-consciously methodologically individualist, again something functionalism wants to break with.

But this is not the sole inspiration for Luhmann. So does he also accept that power not only resides in those instances in which a visible 'will' has been broken, something Peter Morriss (1987: 15) has called later the empiricist 'exercise fallacy' of power, so typical for the Dahlian approach. For him, it exists also where particular wills are never formed in the first place, something which has become famous as the 'third dimension of power' (Lukes 1974). And clearly, he seems more interested in the idea of a social exchange underlying power relations.

Hence, the relational and causal concept of power, combined with a stress on social exchange and a resistence to an empiricist understanding of science, allows Luhmann to somewhat uneasily embed his early functionalism. For he defines power as a medium of communication, which is, of course, 'part and parsons' of structural functionalism.

Media of communication, like power or money, are seen to have developed as a response to the rising complexity of modern societies. As in his entire theorising, Luhmann is interested in the ways systems have been able to cope with (and, in turn, generate) increasing complexity. With the development of written communication and its accrued distance between information, understanding and acceptance/refusal, symbolically generated media of communication become necessary for their function of reducing complexity. They create motivations for the acceptance of communication, in order to avoid that this distance is perceived as making communication too complicated, or even impossible (this view is constant throughout, see Luhmann 1990: 179).

These media are hence a supplementary institution of language. They represent a 'code of generalised symbols' that steer communication and, through this, the transmission of 'selection impulses'. In our case, for instance, does power affect alter's selection of alternatives through the implicit or explicit threat of negative sanctions. For communication exists only if ego or alter (Luhmann uses this still in 1975!) is affected in its 'selections' – what an individualist would perhaps call 'choices' or 'decisions' but which lack the conscious or explicit component of the latter two concepts. Other media of communication, like money, truth and love,

also affect selections, but on the basis of something else.

In a neo-weberian vein, power is a symbolically generated medium of communication which presupposes that *both* partners see alternatives whose realisation they want to avoid. The initial Weberian formulation is, however, recast into the conceptual framework of functionalism. The realisation of power (*Machtausübung*) arises, when the relation of the communication partners to their alternatives to be avoided (*Vermeidungsalternativen*) is such that ego wants to avoid them relatively more than alter. In a more individualist framework, that would sound very close to Keohane and Nye's (1977) concept of power through asymmetrical interdependence. Power as a medium links up one combination of alternatives to be avoided with another, yet preferred one. It ensures that this be visible to the communication partners. For Luhmann (1975: 22), the code of power communicates an asymmetrical relation, a causal relationship, and motivates the transmission of selections of action from the more powerful to the less powerful one. It is based on the control of access to negative sanctions (Luhmann 1990 [1981]: 157).[2]

Power is indeed inextricably connected to negative sanctions (Luhmann 1975: 23). Two further notes are, however, needed with regard to the relationship between power and sanctions. Luhmann does not want to equal negative and positive sanctions, the latter not being part of power. He can see how a positive sanction can be turned into an instrument of power by changing the preferences of another actor such that he/she perceives the foregoing of the reward as a threat (something Thomas Schelling later would call a 'throffer'). In all other cases, Luhmann thinks that the inclusion of positive sanction (the offer of a reward) would make it impossible to distinguish between power and other media of communication like money – or love.[3]

Despite the prominent role of negative sanctions, it is also important to stress that Luhmann follows Talcott Parsons' view that power and con-

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[2] Muddling theories again, Luhmann repeatedly refers to negative sanction as *sources* of power. See Luhmann (1990 [1981]: 158).

[3] Here, Luhmann explicitly refers to Baldwin's analysis (1971) sharing the assessment of the difference, yet disagreeing with Baldwin's idea of keeping both under a common heading.

straint (*Zwang*), which in the last resort means physical violence, are antithetic.[4] Let's mention again that a medium of communication has the role to ensure that alter and ego are not asked every single time to negotiate their relation, to play out all the alternatives they might have. Hence, communication ensures that some alternatives do not arise, as it were, in order to stabilise expectations about the relationship. Communication must ensure an affect on alter's action without ego acting itself. By substituting ego's action for the communicated threat of it, physical violence *replaces* communication itself. Therefore, it cannot be power as such. Yet, according to Luhmann, it represents the extreme form of a power-constitutive alternative that actors would prefer to avoid (Luhmann 1975: 64).

Hence, in his book on power from 1975 we have a hybrid approach where power is (1) merely seen as a reduction of contingency (indeed double contingency since we have to think of both alter and ego) which sounds straightforward interactionist, and (2) its very character as medium of communication is embedded in a functionalist (small) theory of history (or at least of modernisation). Moreover, Luhmann (1975: 11) explicitly accepts Dahl's theory-driving analogy to causality ('die theorieleitende Kausalvorstellung'), even though he wants to use it in a more abstract way.

This somewhat mixed solution is inherently unstable. It is hardly surprising that Luhmann looked for ways to fix it.

2. The purely communicative concept - and examples of its fruitful use in IR

It is probably exaggerated to talk about a second phase in Luhmann's theory before the autopoietic shift. Yet, in his writings well after the initial *Macht*, Luhmann did tease out the communicative potential that remained more buried earlier. Hence, themes became more visible, and indeed his

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[4]This is also similar to Hannah Arendt's (1969) position. The difference is that Arendt's antinomy is based on the idea that power is inextricably linked to consensus or legitimacy, whereas, according to her, violence is not. Luhmann does not want to refer to legitimacy in this context (Luhmann 1975: 68f.).

earlier writings retrospectively more coherent. I call this, in lack of a better word, his purely communicative phase. I would argue that this is the one closest to social constructivism in IR today.

The communicative twist occurs through a small, but heuristically very consequential move: power does not (only) ensure asymmetrical coordination of action, but (also) regulates the communicatively generated *attribution* of causality. 'Thus power is present only when the participants define their behaviour in correspondence to a corresponding medium of communication' (Luhmann 1990 [1981]: 157, my translation). Power is not only permitting a certain type of communication, but is itself in fact socially constructed through communication.[5] Still more constructivist, Luhmann (1990 [1981]: 163) argues that the process of the causal attribution of power, in turn, has an effect on the actual relationships of power.[6] In other words, despite the apparently technical functionalism, Luhmann's interest in communicative theory leads him to develop a strong vision of the social construction of reality, at least for a while. Only that the 'social' referent here is not an individualist mind, but intersubjective communication systems and media.

Such a resolute 're-entry' of power into power-steered communication, produces very interesting research avenues which I would like to exemplify with two examples in IR. First, I would like to demonstrate how Luhmann's discussion of 'power substitutes' seems to make obvious sense to IR scholars. Moreover, I would like to use Luhmann's resolutely communicative turn as a critique of Luhmann's own conception of physical violence as the ultimate power-constituting negative sanction – exemplified through a discussion of the Copenhagen School of security.

The substitution of power
If power is simply an attribution of causality in the communication, then it becomes *ex post* very plausibly to look at symbols which become a

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[5] This has been an important theme in the move to more structural/impersonal power debates in IR. See, for instance Friedrich Kratochwil (1988, in particular 272) and Richard Little (1989). For a discussion, see Guzzini (1993).

[6] Whether it makes sense to talk about power relations when power is a medium of communication is another point.

shorthand for the symbol power, itself a shorthand to allow interaction. Since the exact weighing of alternatives in a relational concept of power is hardly possible for the problem of double contingency, communication develops substitutes for the medium (with the same function of stabilising expectations) which, in turn, become a symbolically generated code of power. There are substitutes in the form of reductions like *hierarchies* (presupposing already a ranking); *history* (attributing power through past events), related to this: *prestige/status* and *the example of previous significant events*; finally, *rules deriving from contracts*. In all these cases the direct communicative recourse to power is replaced by a reference to symbols, that oblige normatively all parties and take account of the presupposed power ranking.

In IR, this idea of *substitutes* for power has been the daily bread of much good IR theorising. So did Hedley Bull (1977) refer to the 'great powers' (that is to hierarchy) as an *institution* for ordering the anarchical society. Vertzberger (1986) has made much work on the role of history in decision-making including its substitute for actual power realisations. More constructivist inclined scholars refer to the discursive construction of power through the mobilisation of collective memory. Reputation has been an important ingredient of deterrence theories and has been revisited more recently (Mercer 1996). Indeed the Cold War obsession of domino theories and 'keeping commitments' so visible in the difficult US disengagement in Vietnam (Kissinger 1979; 1983) makes only sense with the concern about power substitutes which actually cannot be divorced from power as such.

In the very classical understanding of the role of diplomacy, realpolitik diplomats, i.e. those who orient their action according to the balance of power, need substitutes that account for power, such as to avoid that its measurement be each time found out, and fought out, on the battlefield.[7] Many of the classical realists have been concerned about the very absence of such a consensus on the practical level. Kissinger, for instance, deplores

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[7] It is an interestign question whether or not also the battlefield is no more than a substitute. It is certainly a bordercase for a constructivist, since the battlefield has an effect for two reasons: because it is accepted to have such an effect (war as an *institution* of international society), and because it physically constrains.

that with the advent of nuclear weapons the relationship between power and politics has been loosened, and that power has become both more awesome and more 'abstract, intangible, elusive' (Kissinger 1969: 61). In his eyes, it was crucial that diplomats came to a shared understanding of power, independent of its actual use. To make the traditional balance-of-power politics and diplomacy work, the central coordinates, references and symbols, such as national interest or power, must have a translatable meaning. For compensations cannot be used to ease tensions if their value is deeply contested; nor can balancing diplomacy have its effect of moderating conflict, if there is no common understanding of the point of equilibrium (for a longer discussion, see Guzzini 1998: chapter 7 and 231ff.).

Therefore, during the Cold War, some IR scholars have understood their responsibility in contributing to find commonly acceptable substitutes for power. Daniel Frei (1969) urged his peers in his inaugural lecture to help politicians to come up with a generally (i.e. socially or communicatively) accepted measure of power. Such a measure, which implicitly acknowledges a constructed nature of power, would help to stabilise diplomacy in the Cold War.

Spinning the argument further, Luhmann (1975: 10-11) claims that, would science ever become able not only to propose substitutes but actually measure power, this would destroy these substitutes and hence affect reality itself. He feels confident, however, that whatever scientists would come up with, it would be just another set of substitutes and not a real measure of power – and that politics would blissfully ignore it anyway.

Physical violence and power revisited

Another part which would be of interest here is that this somewhat meta-communicational move undermines Luhmann's very idea of the relationship between power and violence. As mentioned above, Luhmann argues that violence is the ultimate power constituting action alternative, although not power itself. This assumes that violence is always that action, which power-inferior actors (or systems) would most prefer to avoid. This is, however, rather implausible since it presupposes a militaristic vision of negative sanctions in which the organised form of physical violence is

necessarily the most threatening action across all domains.

Let me explain why I disagree with the idea that physical violence is necessarily to be seen as the ultimate threat with reference to the understanding of détente policy in the Copenhagen School of security studies (Buzan, Wæver et al. 1998). Basic for this school are two ideas: security is to some extent sectored (military, economic, etc.), and security is neither to be found in objective indicators, nor only in subjective perception: it is discursively constructed. Hence, security analysis focuses on the way issues are discursively 'elevated' into concerns of national security, on the way they are 'securitised' (Wæver 1995) – or its opposite. The basic idea is that when issues are 'securitised', that is, turned into concerns of national security, certain extraordinary measures become legitimate (hence, 'securitisation' is also about power, in fact). Ole Wæver has used this approach to show that the Western détente policy was conceived as 'desecurtising' certain types of East-West relations, such as economic exchange, free movement of people, classically conceived as 'high politics' by communist governments.

The implication of this argument is that for some actors, it might be preferable to keep power mainly defined in terms of physical violence, but *it does not need to be the more powerful one*. Indeed, as wary Soviet governments have shown with regard to the ouvertures (considered offensives) of the Carter administration, they preferred to keep a military definition of their relationship. They resisted the attempt that 'the attribution of causality' be done in economic terms, a field in which it would look less well. The more the US was the military threat it used to be, the more it stabilised expectations. Inversely, for the West, the threat of physical violence was *not* the ultimate power-constituting factor.

One could reply that the role of other factors than physical violence was parasitic on the existence of mutually assured destruction. But this simply reinforces the argument. If MAD had indeed the effect of ruling the ultimate use of force out, then physical violence is only an ultimate threat under certain conditions, namely a primarily military communication. It is not all that difficult to imagine several power relations, in which the ultimate threat of physical violence would simply be inefficient: nuclear warheads might not be the right means to influence interest rates. This is

what the literature calls the lacking fungibility of power (as compared to money).[8] Since Luhmann uses the analogy of power and money, he is forced to overstress the homogeneity of negative sanctions in which, at least in principle, physical violence can substitute any other form.

3. Power in an autopoietic system theory

In his mature phase, Luhmann bases his system theory on the idea of autopoiesis. This is usually considered a very consequent and also consequential move in his theory. Hence, before I will explore the implications for the concept of power, I need first to give a rather brief introduction into the basic idea of Luhmann's late system theory.

Luhmann social theory is a theory of systems. He distinguishes physical, psychic and social systems. Systems have an internal side and an environment, made up mainly by other systems. Between some social systems there can be special relationships, which Luhmann's theory calls 'structural coupling', such as for instance between the systems of politics and of law. For all their differences, psychic and social systems are conceptualised in an isomorphic way. Systems come to exist when (1) they reproduce themselves, by (2) following an internal logic driven by a system-specific binary code. For instance, the social system science which has become autonomous in well differentiated societies, functions according to the code 'true/untrue'. The system builds up certain expectations about its environment which it then sees confirmed or not, in a binary way. This quite ingenious conceptualisation allows Luhmann to have the cake and eat it, too. On the one hand, it permits an inner logic through an operational closure, since there is one binary code which steers 'understanding' from inside the system. On the other hand, the system is open and not deterministic, since the feedback from the environment, deciphered in the binary way of the code, influences its reproduction.

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[8] The classical statement on the power- money analogy in IR can be found in Arnold Wolfers (1962). For a critique of the fungibility assumption, see Raymond Aron (1962: 97-102), and then in particular David Baldwin (1985; 1989).

It is perhaps important to add, that Luhmann proposes a rather unique and very radical constructivist epistemology here which still allows a minimal realist ontology. The environment is not a neutral ground upon which different visions are tested. It is an amorphous thing of whom we only 'know' what the system in its reproduction expects from it. The feedback cannot be likened to a correspondence theory of truth, but corresponds simply as an external check which tells the system science whether its expectations were confirmed or not. Hence, Luhmann claims to have a constructivist position which differs both from a realist version of a correspondence theory of truth and from an idealist position whose epistemology gives up any reference to reality (see respectively Luhmann 1990: 260ff. and 92f.).

With this general background in mind, I would like to demonstrate how the concept, and indeed what he would have referred to as the phenomenon of power, increasingly disappears from the picture. Luhmann's concept of power was to be heavily reduced in its reach by combining two theoretical decisions. Luhmann ties power increasingly to one system, politics, which, in turn, is no longer given prominence among the subsystems of society. I cannot judge what move came first, but the turn to his biology-inspired autopoiesis, and not a kind of hermeneutic reproduction, might require both.

In 1975, Luhmann started with a very wide concept of power, which, as all symbolically generated media of communication, is 'omnipresent' in society. Since this is far less the case in his later writings, it might warrant a central (and lengthy) quote. Opening a chapter on the 'social relevance of power', Luhmann writes

> Like language, symbolically generated media of communication have one necessary systemic reference: society. They pertain to problems of the whole society, and regulate constellations, which are possible at any time and anywhere in society. They cannot be restrained and isolated into sub-systems, in the sense, for instance, that truth would play a role only in science, or power only in politics. There are constellations in connection with doubly contingent selectivity, which cannot be eliminated out of the 'horizon of possibilities' (Möglichkeitshorizont) of human interaction. Wherever humans communicate with each other, there exists the probability of a transfer of selection patterns in one form or another. (A different assumption would be

a good sociological definition of entropy.) Wherever human communicate with each other, there is the probability that they orientate themselves by taking the possibility of a mutual harming into account, thereby having influence on each other. Power is a life-world based universal of social existence (Luhmann 1975: 90, my translation).

The move to autopoiesis as a central concept of systems implied for Luhmann, that every reference to humans had to be replaced by physical, psychic or social systems. That move which is perfectly coherent within his theory has, however, rather profound consequences for the conceptualisation of the media of communication. In particular, it does exactly what Luhmann admonishes in this early quote: it ties specific media closer to 'their' sub-systems. This results, first, from the need to have a code-steered autopoiesis which occurs in operative closure. This code, in turn, is a binary expression of the media of communication. The two concepts have been inextricably connected (Luhmann 1990 [1981]: 196). Second, dissolving the human behind systems means that the link from one subsystem to another can no longer be made by communicative interactions which might carry several media of communication at the same time (power and money, for instance). It must be done through a new concept, 'structural coupling', which is again a system-internal representation of a certain part of the environment. This reinforces the 'inner logic' of the code. All agency is transferred to the systems.[9]

The central place of autopoiesis also undermines any way of understanding communication as a hermeneutic process for which language is crucial – and which might have resolved some of the apparent paradoxes with which Luhmann justifies his approach. Let me give as an example his argument with regard to pluralism in his chapter on world society (Luhmann 1997). He argues that different culturally defined systems in the world cannot be understood by observers who accept this pluralism. Since the observer cannot have a view from somewhere, no Archimedian point,

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[9] This might sound strange, for many IR scholars use agency and individuals or persons interchangeably. But this confuses a level of analysis and the origins of action. In purely structuralist theories, there is, of course, a link to the individual level of analysis; agency, however, is to be located at the systemic level of analysis: structures act through people.

independent of any of these cultures, pluralism must accept an 'in-the-world' observation which is at the same time 'out-of-the world' and hence becomes self-contradictory. But this argument only follows when understanding is conceived in a non-hermeneutic manner. In this, the argument recalls the classical rebuttal by Bernstein (1983) that Kuhn's (1970 [1962]) incommensurability thesis (and its related holistic theory of meaning) is not, or less of, a problem for those who conceive of the observer as translator, both in and out of the language (see also Kuhn 1970).[10] Similarly, German sociology in the tradition of Schutz (1962) has tried to conceptualise the observer as stranger, as opposed to a foreigner, defined by being both in and outside of the community.[11] There is no a priori to believe that the paradox is better resolved though time (observation of observation...), as Luhmann repeatedly proposes.

In any way, once power is tied to the political system and the latter is given an equal, but mutually autonomous place in Luhmann's social theory, little is left of power's omnipresence in practice. This produces a series of debatable implications for his social theory, and indeed our general understanding of politics, as the next section will try to show.

II. Costly choices for power: was there no alternative?

There is something to be said in favour of avoiding omnipresent concepts. The risk is great that this presence comes at the expense of any positive heuristic. Hence, Luhmann is probably right to insist in differentiating power from truth, money, love or other media which can be connected to causal asymmetries. So does, for instance, the 'capacity to effect' (Morriss 1987), or 'to bring about significant consequences' (Lukes 1974), not much to distinguish 'power' from 'love'. Nor are other concepts more compelling

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[10] Since Luhmann criticises the ethics of pluralism (refraining from proposing his own vision), also this conception of translation might make the latter more acceptable.

[11] For a recent discussion, see Pizzorno (1994 [1993]). This is, roughly, where some post-structuralists tend to put their own position, since strangers are at the border, the 'margins', both in and out of a community/society.

such as, for instance, that '[power's] widest meaning is', looking from the power bidder's view, 'that of a potential for change' (Boulding 1989: 10) or, from the recipient's one, the 'ability not to have to change, to adjust to change or to tolerate change' (Burton 1965: 8). It is all the greater as the underlying power concept was meant to be causal. Omnipresent causes produce tautologies. Also, simply deducing power backwards from effects will necessarily produce explanatory circles.[12] As this section will argue, however, there are some peculiarities about the concept of power which need to be taken into account when making theoretical choices – or at least, its implications be spelled out.

The following will be a conceptual critique, more precisely both an internal and external critique. Especially the latter is no obvious enterprise. For conceptual analysis allows the critique of concepts mainly in terms of internal coherence. Since analytical concepts are basically theory-dependent, i.e. their meaning derives from the way they are embedded in a theory, it makes only limited sense to criticise theoreticians for using the 'wrong' concept, except if it can be shown to be incoherent within the theory. Hence, in principle, conceptual critique is internal.

Besides the internal concept-theory coherence check, there is, however, also another external critique. This derives from the idea that the meaning of concepts is in their use. Put more strongly, conceptual analysis is not only interested in what concepts mean, but *what they do.*

This section will first show that the choice of certain power concepts is not innocent, in that power is a concept which fulfills certain purposes in our political language.[13] This amounts to an external critique of Luhmann. This is followed by a more internal critique which, in a comparison with some ideas of Foucault's theory of power and Bourdieu's field theory, tries to see whether on the basis of similar meta-theoretical assumptions, alternative theories would have been possible that would reserve a different place to power.

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[12]One interesting path which I am not following here is Barnes', a constructivist thinker usually quoted by Luhmann, who reminded us, that this tautology might be all there is to the concept of power (Barnes 1988).

[13] This is not necessarily a universal, but it seems to work at least in some contexts, like the European or North American.

1. An external critique: contexts of power and the political function of power discourse

Peter Morriss did the first systematic study of the question: why do we need 'power'? He distinguishes the practical, the moral, and the evaluative contexts (Morriss 1987: 37-42). In the practical context, we are interested in power because we want to know what things we can bring about. Agents want to know their powers in order to realise their opportunities. Knowing their abilities, they might also decide which to enhance. People are also interested in power, because they want to know what other agents can bring about. If we want to reach an outcome, and it is not in ours but in some other agent's reach, this knowledge could be the beginning of getting a deal done. The most important interest might perhaps be to avoid being harmed by the effect of powers. We are interested in power, secondly, because through its assessment, moral responsibility can be attached or avoided. 'Ought' implies 'can'. Accused persons need to show that they could not bring about an action, or that they could not prevent it. Finally, Morriss finds a third context, the evaluative one. Here people are interested in concepts of power in order to judge not individuals, but social systems.

In other words, Morriss' practical context refers to the 'art of the possible', to the realm of possible action, whereas the moral and the evaluative contexts refer to the assignment of blame and/or responsibility for action. In exactly this way, William Connolly had earlier argued that there is an irremediable connection between power and responsibility

> When we see the conceptual connection between the idea of power and the idea of responsibility we can see more clearly why those who exercise power are not eager to acknowledge the fact, while those who take a critical perspective of existing social relationships are eager to attribute power to those in privileged positions. For to acknowledge power over others is to implicate oneself in responsibility for certain events and to put oneself in a position where *justification* for the limits placed on others is expected. To attribute power to another, then, is not simply to describe his role in some perfectly neutral sense, but is more like *accusing* him of something, which is then to be denied or justified (Connolly 1974: 97, original emphasis).

Whereas Morriss distinguishes between three different contexts, Con-

nolly's position seems to imply that the moral context, albeit not always the primary one, is necessarily implied when we use an idea of power. Morriss refuses this argument because we often do not refer to 'power' for blaming individuals, but for evaluating societies. Furthermore, he says that often we want to know power to be prepared for what others can do to us. I think that this is right. But the argument to be discussed here is not about why we *look* for power, as Morriss does, but why we *call* something a phenomenon of power, as Connolly and Lukes do. This shifts the question: does it mean that assigning power asks for justifications, be they individual or collective? Is justification necessarily linked to responsibility?

Here, I think Lukes and Connolly made a very important point. As we have already seen, 'power' usually implies an idea of counterfactuals. The act of *attributing* power redefines the borders of the 'politics' in the sense of the 'art of the possible'. Accepting an attribution of power might result in particular actions. Lukes (1974) rightly noticed that Bacharach's and Baratz' (1970) conceptualisation of power sought to redefine what counts as a political issue. To be 'political' means to be potentially changeable, i.e. not something 'natural', 'God-given', but something on which agency could potentially have an influence. (Operational) power analysis, as all other assignments of power, is therefore a power exercise or 'political' itself (For a similar point, see John Hoffmann (1988: 7-8). This does not mean that this political potential is always taken up. Political acts can be without any significant effect.

To refer to power, hence, opens up a debate. In this debate, the claim that power was involved must be justified. Justification implies an assessment about feasibility and thus responsibility. When 'power' is analysed through its attribution, it is 'framed less from the point of view of predicting the future behaviour of recipients than form a perspective that enables participants and investigators to locate responsibility for the imposition of limiting conditions by linking those conditions to the decisions people make, or could make and don't' (Connolly 1974: 101).

In a sense, verbalising 'power' is hence redefining 'political space' in all the three different contexts established by Morriss. In the practical context, seeing power from the recipient side tends to look for effects whose origins might have been unknown before. We attribute power in the

practical context to show that some harmful effects, to which we are exposed, could be avoided. This could mean that nonintended or unforeseen effects must now be justified as being unavoidable (or as being too costly to change, and so forth).[14] Here the issue of moral responsibility is only potentially present. The moral and evaluative context is evoked when the power wielders keep on exercising power and/or preventing the better social arrangement from being realised. Thus, Lukes and Connolly are not necessarily tying all critique to a question of individual blame. Their attempt to find an empirical referent for power structures in some elites implies blame only, exactly as within Morriss' approach, if the latter are preventing change. Yet, one should be careful to note that nothing of the just said implies that attributing 'power' is necessarily 'radical' or 'progressive'. Redefining the boundaries of political issues, the 'art of the possible', just means this. The only implication is a questioning of the status quo.

This discussion has a double implication for Luhmann's narrow concept of power. Let us, for the sake of the argument, assume that Luhmann is right, that is, power is a medium which is tied in developed societies to the system of politics only. Moreover, the functional differentiation does not necessarily hierarchise between systems. The result is twofold. On the one hand, Luhmann's evolutionary theory of history cements the division of subsystems as functionally necessary and basically reinforces the view of the status quo as a necessary one. Second, the theory itself, having a looping effect on the environment it observes (a re-entry into itself), disempowers any attempt to question the necessity, or even the borders of systems which have already been differentiated.

Consequently, Luhmann has a rather negative view on attempts to mix up codes and media, as, most prominently perhaps, the link between the political and economic system in present approaches in International Political Economy. Moreover, any attempt to do so, i.e. any attempt to politicise, is excluded since his concept of power does not cover it: political

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[14] In a similar vein, Daniel Frei (1969: 647) notes that the concept of power is fundamentally identical with the concept of 'the political'; to include something as a factor of power in one's calculus, means to 'politicise' it. This is also one of the main purposes of Susan Strange's concept of 'structural power' (see, for instance, Strange 1988).

process is reduced to technological adaptation. The problem is hence not only that power is tied to politics, but also that the range of the 'art of the possible' has concomitantly be reduced to exclude as dysfunctional basically all questions which pertain to the re-definition of the borders of the public space. This is really not far from Thatcher's 'there is no alternative' principle. For this, we get no other reason, that it has been born out by the differentiation of society – something itself established by Luhmann's theory in the first place. The circle is necessary.

To put it shortly: Luhmann's concept of power has a doubly limiting effect on 'politics' by tacitly legitimating the limits posed to politics by the status quo (and hence preempt issues to be politicised) and by defining the subject matter of that system very narrowly. Luhmann might have a concept of the political system which is potentially global and hence attractive to IR. But at the same time, he defines it so narrowly that it exactly excludes the very questions the globalisation literature sees as most challenging, like, for instance, the very subject matter of International Political Economy or, in political theory, the question about the future of (which) politics in a 'post-national constellation' – to use the words of Luhmann's long-standing German counterpart Jürgen Habermas (1998). For him, these would be technocratic questions of a successful reduction of complexity.

2. An internal critique: decentralised subjects and diffused, yet hierarchical power

As we have seen, Luhmann decided to abandon the idea that media of communication are trans-systemic and locked them into one system. I will not discuss whether system theory *needs* to make such a move. Since his earlier work could do without, there are at least some doubts allowed. Instead, this last section will simply look at other social theories who faced similar problems, yet did not go as far in abandoning the role of power both on the level of action and of observation. For this, one has to choose theories which have a certain family resemblance. They are not many and hence the comparison is not only limited in number but also in scope. Still,

I think it allows to highlight some important points.

I have chosen Foucault's treatment of power which is quite well known now in IR and Pierre Bourdieu's social theory of fields. None of them is methodologically individualist. They do, or could be made to, espouse constructivist meta-theoretical principles. In contrast to Luhmann, however, they deconstruct the classical vision of the subject in a way that it does not disappear. Bourdieu's approach, in particular, offers a perhaps more coherent conceptualisation of power – and, for sure, a conceptual apparatus which is empirically more accessible. Via a demonstration of these conceptualisations of power, I hope to indicate where one does not need to follow the Luhmannian path.

A micro-sociology of power (Foucault)

One of the basic intuitions of Luhmann's theory is its extreme anti-'humanist' vision of the way social theory has to be conceived. The individual is openly exposed as the reification it is in our common understanding. Luhmann dissolves the individual behind the different systems there are, including psychic and social systems. This implies that agency is done only within those systems, not by what we usually refer to as individual 'agents'. In radically constructivist manner, it is *ascribed* to persons constructed in communication.

Such an understanding bears some similarities with another post-structuralist theoretician who became famous for having declared (at some point) the 'death of the subject'. Yet, whereas Luhmann disposes of the individual behind system communications, Foucault starts a radical move to a micro-sociology of the body. In Foucault the subject disappears under the weight of its conditioning. Hence, it is, paradoxically, forcefully restated: *l'assujettissement* focuses on the subject as (empirical) locus where empowering and disempowering relations meet. As such, it is not necessarily an anti-humanist concept, although it questions the autonomy of modern (wo)man. In Luhmann, the subject is a pure ascription and hence disappears behind the social system of communication, being cut into a cognitive, physical, and social system. In other words, whereas Foucault tends to (perhaps: over)socialise the subject, looking at the way the identity and even the very body are *assujetti*, Luhmann systematically defines it

away.

Luhmann would certainly not have debated that there are other ways to deal with the difficult topic of subjectivity in contemporary social theory. The question is, rather, whether there is anything won through having a Foucauldian conception. Here, it seems to me, that a discursive understanding has the additional advantage to open up studies in the sedimentation of language which are less important for Luhmann (here the debate with his Bielefeld colleague Koselleck comes to mind) and which comes under the label of genealogy in Foucaultian inspired studies. Now, whereas Luhmann seems to reify the historical development of functional differentiation, this de-constructing approach would try to unveil the power relations inherent in the fixed meanings of some central concepts and issues (see, for instance, Jens Bartelson 1995).[15]

Field theory (Bourdieu)
Similarly, there is no logical deduction from the idea that subsystems have become more equal to the idea that hierarchy, or social stratification, is a concept to be heaped on the dustbin of history. The basic intuition of Luhmann (1997: 157) is that functional differentiation has turned the world 'acentrical' and 'heterarchic'. But this still leaves many possibilities to conceive of power and functional differentiation without a circular reification of the status quo.

Luhmann seems to assume that if the political system is no longer hierarchically superposed over the others, hierarchy itself diminishes (I might be wrong here. I proceed as if I were not). Luhmann explicitly says that principles of inclusion/exclusion have become more important than classical stratification principles. This is in line with his evolutionary vision moving from stratified to functionally differentiated societies. But I wonder, whether this critique is not simply based on naming things differently.

Recent power research specifically in IPE is trying to come to grips with an international society which is increasingly stratified, exactly

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[15] It is true that in principle Luhmann's theory, being intrinsically reflexive, can make this 'blind spot' visible by a higher order observation.

because of the principles of inclusion/ exclusion. Similarly to Luhmann, there is much literature on the diffusion, if not evaporation of power (Strange 1996), if by that is meant a control or steering capacity, an assessment akin to, among others, Luhmann's vision.

Although it is somewhat far-fetched to compare the conceptual intuitions of Susan Strange with Luhmann's thorough social theory, it gives me a foil to indicate some of the peculiarities of Luhmann's theory when applied to IR. In a somewhat more old-fashioned functionalist manner, here similar to Ernst-Otto Czempiel (1981), Strange argues that classical state functions are taken over by others than the political system, by mafias and multinational enterprises. In other words, she depicts a world in which power has been 'privatised'.

There are two conceptual tensions with Luhmann's approach which might be worthwhile highlighting. On the one hand, Susan Strange would de-link the analysis of particular functions from the sub-systems to which there might have been attached before: political (and not only those) functions can be taken over by economic and societal networks, and, why not, transsocietal epistemic communities. As a result, even on the classical political functions, territoriality plays less of a role. Using an older terminology, one could say, that on the input functions, national institutions are the main part of what there is – democratic representation being a pure, but special case – but on the output functions, this is no longer the case. This means, that whereas functional differentiation still applies, the organisational or institutional setting can no longer be taken for granted. In times of change, this becomes actually an empirical question.

The second tension concerns the fact that for Strange, there is individual agency and that hence she can conceive of some actors or networks to be perfectly present and influential in many of the heterarchic systems. This would be achieved, not through the convertibility of media of communication (or the fungibility of power resources), but because some actors control different types of capital which, in the now more fluent boundaries, they can 'cash in'. But this would, again, mean that we need some concept at hand with which we can link different sources of power to different systems. Then, we would be able to see that the very existence of such a heterarchy could be analysed as part of a hierarchical system since it

systematically reproduces inclusion and exclusion.

There are social theories around which have handled these matters. I do not dwell on one social theory which seems an obvious candidate, namely Manuel Castell's massive approach to the information society (Castells 1996). It offers a theory of society which focuses, as Luhmann does, on communication/culture and economy as globalising sub-systems in a wealth of conceptual innovation and empirical analysis. One might like this or not, but there is a strong, both theoretically and empirically based competitor, already out there. The final view is both a diffusion of power which, however, is not horizontally organised.

Another possible inspiration is Bourdieu's field theory. For the present argument, Bourdieu is perhaps the best comparison since his theory comes in many regards closest to Luhmann's. This applies in particular to his theory of fields which have a similar role as social systems have in Luhmann

A field stands both for a patterned set of practices which suggests competent action in conformity with rules and roles, and for the playing (or battle) field in which agents, endowed with certain field-relevant or irrelevant capital, try to advance their position. This social subsystem is, however, not mainly defined by its functionality as compared to the entire system, but relies intrinsically on a historically derived system of shared meanings which define agency and make action intelligible. Its boundaries are an empirical question. Being historical, fields are open and change over time. But their inertia, their habitus (field-specific shared disposition), their internal (open) logic, what Bourdieu calls the *sens* referring both to meaning and direction, produces an inward looking reproduction which can take over many of the features of Luhmann's autopoiesis.

The practices of agents in these fields are inspired by taken for granted beliefs, the so-called *doxa,* which Bourdieu defines also as the very presuppositions of the field. Doxa refers to the quasi-perfect correspondence of a socially constructed, yet objectified order (structure and fields) and the subjective principles of its organizations that agents share. It is in this spontaneous sharing of the common-sense in which the natural, but also the social world appears as self-evident (Bourdieu 1977: 164). This concept is his empirically narrower translation of the German *Lebenswelt*.

Such an analysis relies heavily on the study of field-specific sets of *dispositions*, called the *habitus*. Bourdieu defines the *habitus* as a product of history which in itself (through effecting certain practices) produces history. It guarantees the active presence of past experiences through providing schemes of perception, thought and action which tend to reproduce practices in conformity with the field throughout time (Bourdieu 1980: 91) The habitus functions like the materialisation of collective memory. It is the obvious link to a more constructivist theory both at the level of action, and, since the scientific field works in a similar way, at the level of observation.

The logic of the field also implies that the dispositions are not them-selves perceived as the result of a particular history; they are, as Bourdieu says, the 'forgetting of history that history produces', or, in other words, collective memory that appears as the 'natural' way of doing, perceiving and thinking things. Dispositions lead to the smooth reproduction of exactly those assumptions that define the autonomy of the field. This is Bourdieu's *sens pratique* which means both meaning/sense (of action and practices) and drive/direction (of the open reproduction of fields). It is important to note that this 'reproduction' is neither closed nor mechanistic.[16]

Whereas the theory of fields is not dissimilar to Luhmann's vision of *social* systems, this is is less the case for Bourdieu's theory of stratification based on his theory of capital. Here is perhaps the biggest difference with Luhmann, because these forms of capital both link up different fields, and set them apart, since their role and efficacy are different from one to another. Bourdieu distinguishes between economic, social, and cultural capital (symbolic capital being a fourth but slightly different notion). Agents are endowed with different amounts of these capitals. Conversely, their capital has not always the same efficacy depending on the context in which it is used. Having lots of economic capital might not be of much use in being well positioned as an artist, although it certainly influences the way the artistic field is structured. Indeed, to some extent the very identity

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[16] For a more detailed discussion in IR, see Guzzini (2000), and in IPE, see Leander (2000).

of these fields/subsystems is closely connected to the particular mix of the there relevant capital.

Such a theoretical framework has several advantages. First, the non-strictly materialist definition of capital allows for field-specific analysis and for linking up fields. For this, however, Bourdieu still keeps a concept of an agent, even if individualists might find it over-socialised. Moreover, it also allows for an understanding of hierarchy within and across fields which can coexist with a diffusion of centers of power. Heterarchy is no contradiction to hierarchy. For the effective control over outcomes might diminish unequally among different fields and respective agents. Related to this, it allows to see power relations in every singly field, without, however, reducing all relations to them. Finally, this allows to have a more contingent theory of fields/subsystems which is not deduced from a teleology of complexity.

Let me conclude this section with a further advantage illustrated by an example. In his earlier book on power, reputation is seen as a substitute for the medium power. In his study of science, reputation is used as a substitute of truth. Whereas Luhmann tries to keep the implications of that similarity at bay (coming to sometimes rather naive statements about the working of science), Bourdieu would spell them out. On the international level, Bourdieu's approach would make it obvious to study the fields of non-territorially bound communities, such as for instance, Susan Strange's 'international business civilisation' (Strange 1989).In other words, his approach has been used in extensive, and empirically very detailed studies of different fields. It offers a conceptual apparatus which is perhaps empirically more fruitful than Luhmann's which might be a tick too high on the 'ladder of abstraction' (Sartori,).

Conclusion

This paper has tried to initiate a dialogue between IR theory and Niklas Luhmann's system theory, on the basis of a conceptual analysis of power. It attempted to show that Luhmann's concept has been detrimentally affect-ed by his last move to autopoiesis, although it is not clear whether these

theoretical choices were necessary. Instead of developing on his rich communicative understanding of power, Luhmann ties power to one system, politics, and ends up having a very limited of politics, itself. For the theory tends to reify the status quo in terms of a functional necessity. In a comparison with theories who bear a family resemblance, Foucault and Bourdieu, the paper tried to show that there are alternative ways to have a non-individualist social theory which do not theorise political agency away.

The paper wants to show that some parts of Luhmann's theorising warrant a much more thorough attention than hitherto paid in IR. By using examples from IR literature, I hope to have shown that this is not at all as difficult as it is generally believed to be.

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