

The background of the book cover is a collage of various playing cards, including the King of Spades, Queen of Spades, and several numbered cards like the 9 of Spades and 8 of Hearts. The cards are scattered and overlapping, creating a textured, historical feel.

A Theory of World Politics

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Mathias Albert



A Theory of World Politics

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Introduction

Ambition and preliminaries

This book proposes a theory of world politics. It analyses world politics as a specific and historically relatively recent form of politics. It takes politics to be a functionally differentiated realm of modern society, and it takes modern society to be a world society. Put more formally in terms of an approach based on systems theory, world politics is a subsystem of the (functionally differentiated) political system of world society.

This book is about world politics. It is not an international relations book, nor is it a sociology book; nor, for that matter, is it a history book. It is a book arguing that to understand world politics as a social system within world society requires pooling the fund of knowledge of all of these disciplines. Such a design will, hopefully, lead to a range of insights and make for a stimulating read. However, it does provide a challenge to those more immersed in specific, discipline-focused approaches to the subject.

A Theory of World Politics starts from the quite simple observation that all social relations and all formations and transformations of social structures take place within society and as an evolution of society. It first demonstrates what it means to take world society seriously as a theoretical concept, and that forms of social differentiation provide a main key for understanding its evolution and form. The book then goes on to describe how a *system* of world politics as a specific form of politics took shape in a long process that lasted roughly from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The point here is not to deny that many instances of interaction between polities took place before then, interactions that could be described as a kind of world politics. Rather it is to claim that only in its modern form, in which it emerges from within a functionally differentiated political system of world society, does world politics assume

a *systemic* character. Metaphorically speaking, the issue here is how a kind of 'proto'-system of world politics, which consisted of any number of individual journeys, turned itself into a system of organised traffic (with such things as timetables and complicated fare structures).

One of the main ambitions of this book, in fact, is to avoid using the term 'system' in a loose sense and to be very precise about what it actually means to talk about world politics as a kind of social system. It is on this basis that the book proceeds to describe the seemingly incoherent variety of forms of organising political authority in the contemporary system of world politics as actually *coherent*, inasmuch as it expresses the various forms of social differentiation present in the system. Things as different as the ordering of world politics according to power 'status', relations between 'equal' sovereign territorial states, supranational forms of authority, global governance, regionalisation and so on can all be found at the same time, and this variety has certainly been noted time and again. What this book proposes, therefore, is a theoretical framework that sees this variety as an expression of social differentiation within the system of world politics.

The description of a heterogeneous system of world politics in a theoretically coherent fashion is one of the rewards hopefully to be gained from reading the following chapters. However, the reward comes at the cost of quite a few intellectual demands. For many readers, to approach world politics in the way that the following chapters do will be counter-intuitive. Is not world politics something that, in various guises, has existed over the millennia? Is it not governed by regularities and laws that rarely if ever change? Is not the 'international' a level located somehow 'above' other forms of politics? Finally, is international politics not something that refers to the realm of states, while world politics encompasses more than that? This book assumes from the outset that the answer to all of these questions is 'no'. It does so because it starts out by viewing society as a social system and because it takes all social systems to be based on communication alone.

All communication constitutes and 'continues' society. Society to a significant extent evolves through the way in which it is differentiated. Regardless of the specific theory of society used, there is hardly any disputing the fact that, on a grand historical scale, society proceeded from segmentation (e.g. into hunter-gatherer bands, tribes), via stratification (into distinct levels with clearly demarcated statuses, e.g. estates or classes), to functional differentiation (into politics, the

economy, law etc.). It is equally widely agreed, in addition, that one form of social differentiation did not simply replace the other. Rather, the different forms folded into one another in a complex fashion and so came to characterise modern society. Society is obviously differentiated functionally (which, in the most basic sense, means that politics, economy, law, religion etc. appear to be different from each other in the first place). Yet, in many respects, it remains segmented (at least in the political and legal systems territorial segmentation plays a tremendous role), and stratification is entrenched in various forms and scales of inequality too.

All social systems are differentiated systems, and all social systems are characterised by the simultaneous presence of different forms of differentiation. While, in this book, segmentation, stratification and functional differentiation play an important role in analysing and describing system formation and evolution, it should be emphasised that there is a huge difference between using a theory of differentiation as an analytical tool, on the one hand, and giving a structuralist account, on the other hand. Whereas structuralist accounts invariably identify strong constraints on developmental paths and place substantial restrictions on contingency, using differentiation theory allows for an extreme degree of contingency. Forms of social differentiation do not in any way prescribe which evolutionary paths can be tried. They merely identify historical conditions which make it more likely that some variations will be selected in social systems as the basis for further evolution, while others will not be. It can always be otherwise, and revolutionary turns remain a distinct possibility in social systems. To use just one prominent historical example: as long as stratification trumps functional differentiation in society, it is simply less likely that those belonging to the Third Estate will acquire wealth, be judged right or become powerful than that members of the nobility will. Yet this does not prevent things from changing fundamentally over time, successful revolutions taking place (in addition to the far more numerous unsuccessful and mostly unremembered ones) or things turning out rather differently from one day to the next.

Starting with such a concept of world society turns many established ways of imagining and thinking about social reality on their heads. The basic question about society is no longer 'how is it held together?', as in most classical theories of society, it is rather 'how does communication continue?' Society, in other words, is an incredibly complex

arrangement that has evolved over time and is not only based on communication but has as its sole 'purpose' to ensure that communication can continue. Once we focus on modern world society, the question becomes how in this process do specific forms of communication, symbolically generalised media of communication and specific systems and subsystems evolve in and through the operation of society. System and structure formation is always going on in society (as in any complex system), so the main question and image must then have to do with society's *internal* evolution. Society evolves through internal differentiation and system formation. This leads to a completely different image of the social world compared to, for example, that of a whole to which new parts are added, or that of an assembly of levels on top of which another level emerges over time. It also leads to a point that many people socialised in various theoretical traditions outside systems theory find very hard to swallow: namely, the seemingly trivial one that a theory about politics (or, in the present case, a subsystem of the political system) can only be about politics, and not about anything else. This commonly leads to the questions about whether, for example, economic or legal 'factors' are properly taken into account. The simple answer to such questions is as follows. Economy, law, religion, organisations, individuals and so on are taken into account in the political system in that it observes them as systems or addresses of communication in its environment. However, it can only do so on its own terms, that is to say that the communication involved is political communication. Furthermore, a theory about a social system that is seen to be based on communication alone can never be anything other or anything 'more' than a theory about the way in which such a social system evolves on the basis of its internal processing of meaning. This is the challenging and, indeed, often difficult shift which follows from a systems theory starting point: the fabric of social reality analysed is not one of actors, people, institutions and so on that could somehow be described as being 'political', 'legal' or 'economic' actors and so on, but one of communication within self-referential social systems. This is what is meant by the admittedly awkward term used with respect to social systems, that of their being 'operatively closed'. Social systems are modes of communication and not entities to which a message can be delivered like a letter – there simply cannot be political communication outside the political system nor economic communication outside the economic system. Nonetheless, to continue that example, the political

system makes very good sense of the economic system, as much as the economic system makes sense of the political system all the time. But they can only do this on the basis of their own 'languages', that is their codes and symbolically generalised media of communication ('power' in the case of the political and 'money' in the case of the economic system).¹

To ask readers to put themselves inside a basically systems theory view of the social world is to ask a lot of them already, but a second demand which probably runs counter to the academic socialisation of many has to do with the fact that this book is primarily a book *about* something – world politics. It is not primarily a book *of* sociology, international relations (IR) or history. This is reflected in the fact that it is not a book that starts within a distinct body of literature; it is one that draws a broad range of literatures around its subject instead. But drawing on a range of different literatures is not merely an issue of intellectual style. In substantive terms, it reflects the fact that, while scholars of international relations have long been rather negligent of the social environment in which their subject is embedded, sociologists have likewise tended to overlook world politics. There simply is no readily available, coherent body of literature sitting strictly within the boundaries of one of the relevant disciplines that could easily be extended by the present theory. Thus, although by being about world politics this book is looking at a core subject in IR, it does not start its intellectual journey from within IR. Such an approach demands from an IR audience the willingness to think outside the IR theoretical box. Yet the idea behind this book is that it is not only worthwhile to 'think about IR outside of IR', but high time this was done – if claims that

¹ In many respects this book takes Luhmannian systems theory as its starting point, although it deals with world politics as a substantive issue that systems theory thus far has almost completely neglected. And it certainly uses systems theory far more in a heuristic than in an orthodox fashion. However, sharing some of the basic assumptions with Luhmann's theory as outlined here, and taking up the issue of how far, for example, issues of economics need to be taken up in a theory of world politics, one analogy needs to be pointed out. Luhmann in his work has books (most notably *Social Systems*, Luhmann 1995; and the *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, Luhmann 1997) which deal with the theory of society and social systems and, among other things, the issue of how specific function systems fit into the grander scheme of things. Yet far more numerous are his books on specific function systems, such as politics (Luhmann 2000a), the economy (Luhmann 1994), law (Luhmann 2008), art (Luhmann 2000b) and so on. If anything, this book is of the latter not the former kind.

inter- or transdisciplinary approaches foster knowledge are to be taken seriously and actually lead to such approaches being practised.

While the present proposal of a theory is a bold endeavour simply by reason of its broad thematic scope, in another sense it is also a modest undertaking. 'A' *Theory of World Politics* is not 'The' *Theory of World Politics*. This emphasis on being one among many possible approaches to the subject matter in hand is, however, only partly an acknowledgement of the fact that different theoretical and methodological traditions will invariably lead to diverging theoretical accounts. It is much more an expression of the conviction that specific theories are devised for a specific subject matter and that a range of theoretical assumptions always prefigure what this subject matter is, and what, therefore, a possible theoretical approach designed to make sense of it might entail.

It is in that sense that this book understands *world politics* in a rather specific way. This understanding and the corresponding terminology differ from many established uses, particularly in the field of international relations. Though many of the assumptions and terms underlying such an approach to world politics will be elaborated in more detail in Part I, it seems worthwhile to spell out some of them now.

The starting point here is the idea of world society as the most comprehensive of social systems. While Chapter 1 will introduce various dimensions of the meanings of 'world' and 'society', the particular notion of world society used here follows the tradition of systems theory and sees world society as the *entirety of communication*. This understanding hinges on a quite basic theoretical assumption: that everything social is constituted as, and through, communication. Such an approach leads one to view the entirety of communication as world society. This puts it in sharp contrast to classical sociology, which sees society as a normatively integrated entity, as well as to a fair proportion of IR, which sees world society as a social realm separate from and existing side by side with others (such as the 'international system' or 'international society').

Using the levels metaphor as an illustrative case in point and jumping straight into the issue of world politics, then, world politics is seen here as a specific form of politics which emerges *within* (and together with) the political system. The political system is a function system of modern society. This means that world politics is not something that emerges from pre-existing levels of (local, national etc.) politics, nor is it located

somehow 'above' them. The system of world politics is differentiated as a subsystem within the political system, so questions of hierarchy between 'levels' do not play a large role in this respect. World politics is a specific form of politics within the political system and a large part of this book is about the historical evolution of this specific form. It is in that sense that throughout this book it is important to bear in mind the difference between *the political system of world society*, on the one hand, and *the system of world politics*, on the other. *The political system of world society* is one function system of a world society differentiated functionally (others are, for example, the legal system or the economic system), whereas *the system of world politics* is a subsystem of the political system of world society. Within the system of world politics a semantics of the 'global', the 'world' and the 'international' has evolved, which relies heavily on the image of a political system as somehow 'layered' into hierarchical levels. Yet, *as a subsystem of the political system of world society, the system of world politics is neither 'above' nor 'below' any other of its subsystems* (which can be as different as, for example, environmental, Ecuadorian, constitutional or, for that matter, Californian politics).

Somewhat in passing, the previous paragraph contained a reference to the terminology of the 'world' as opposed to, most notably, the 'international' when those terms come to be combined with 'politics'. To avoid confusion, it needs to be made clear at this point that, in substantive theoretical terms, this book makes no difference whatsoever between 'international politics' and 'world politics'. There simply is no independent social system of world politics that could be distinguished from a social system of international politics, let alone a history in which one might have preceded the other. Yet within the system of world politics, there is a complex *semantics* of 'world politics', 'international politics', 'international relations' and other affiliated terms that, historically, has constantly shifted. That the subsystem of the political system described here is called the system of world politics rather than the system of international politics is solely due to the situation, described in Chapter 1, whereby the notion of 'world politics' emerged in a complex semantic field of 'world' composite terms, particularly in the nineteenth century. Yet though, analytically, international and world politics could be used almost interchangeably in what follows, there is, of course, a far more nuanced picture when it comes to their appearance as historical

semantics (see the section on “‘International” and “world politics”: a note on semantics’ in Chapter 3 on this).

Chapter overview

The book is organised into three main parts. These could roughly be described as being about: (1) concepts and context, in particular with respect to world society and social differentiation; (2) the emergence and evolution of the system of world politics; and (3) reflections on and applications of the theory presented. The order of these parts and of the chapters they contain has been deliberately chosen. However, readers of the manuscript of this book have had quite different reading experiences that strongly correlate with their respective disciplinary backgrounds. Most notably, readers from sociology often find it necessary to read the first part in order to be able to contextualise the argument developed in the second part. Some readers with a background in IR, however, say that, for them, many of the conceptual points made in Part I only began to unlock themselves in the light of Part II. So, after reading this introduction, readers with an IR background may wish to consider reading the second part before the first.

The first part introduces *world society theory*. This is where the book's roots in Luhmann's theory are most clearly evident. One of the main ideas involved here is this. If communication constitutes society, if no communication can take place ‘outside’ society, and if, since the full discovery of the globe, all communication in principle can connect to all other communication, then there is one social system which includes all social systems, and that is *world society*.² Unlike in classical sociological and many IR uses of the term, ‘world society’ here does *not* entail a substantive claim about some kind or degree of social integration or cohesion. It simply refers to the entirety of the social system as a ‘social whole’ and thus directs attention to the question of how, in an important dimension, order can always also – though never exclusively – be accounted for by looking at the *internal differentiation of world society*.

The first part will more systematically develop the concept of world society in order to use it as an analytical context for describing the

² See Hondrich (1992) on the issue of remaining ‘niche societies’.

evolution and the contemporary form of the system of world politics in the second part.³ This development itself will take place in two steps.

In Chapter 1, the concept of world society as a social whole will be dissected and further developed through its two composite parts, 'world' and 'society'. The main line of argument here is that, in order to avoid much of the confusion which has surrounded Luhmann's notion of world society and to put it to practical analytical use, it is useful to distinguish between three different dimensions of the meaning of 'world' in this context: a phenomenological, a semantic and a structural one.⁴ The necessary corollary to this exercise is to point out the specific use of the notion of 'society' in this context. The main issue here is that the sociological tradition uses two fundamentally different understandings of the term. One refers to society as a social formation which crucially depends on some integrative device (most notably a 'community', a 'collective identity' etc.). The other sees it as a social system defined through the distinction between system and environment. The latter understanding also provides the ground for the theoretical perspective underlying this book.

Chapter 2 applies the concept of social differentiation to world society. As a basic concept used to describe society from the inception of sociology as an academic discipline, *functional differentiation* has played an important role in modern sociology. It has mostly remained implicit in theories of international relations, but has been used in sociological theorising in relation to societies understood as nation-state societies. There is, however, no reason why this powerful way of describing and understanding society should not be used in relation to world society as well. It is important to be precise about our exact understanding of differentiation, particularly with respect to its status

³ Further elaborating on the concept of world society is an exercise that markedly differs from Luhmann's analyses of different aspects of society. There has always been a strong impression that while, theoretically, Luhmann saw his theory of society as a theory of world society, there was a large disjuncture between the scope of his historical knowledge in many fields, on the one hand, and his more limited perception of world society, which was confined, basically, to its Western part.

⁴ It could be said at this point that the lack of mutual engagement between this sort of theory of (world) society, on the one hand, and theories of international relations, on the other, has to do with the fact that they refer to different dimensions of 'world' (with Luhmann leaning more towards the phenomenological side, IR theory more towards the structural side).