



Philosophische Fakultät

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Towards a Postcolonial Critique of Sociological  
Systems Theory

Preprint published at the Institutional Repository of the Potsdam University:  
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# Luhmann in da Contact Zone: Towards a Postcolonial Critique of Sociological Systems Theory

*Lars Eckstein and Christoph Reinfandt*

At least since the middle of the 18th century, Europe could conceive of itself as a dynamic society, but its own process of refocusing on technological innovation, law reform, education etc. only had to follow a logic of progress, while the world at large could simply be colonized. (Luhmann 1995c, 20, our trans.)

There is a totalitarian bent of modernity that presents the other side, coloniality, as something to be overcome when, indeed, coloniality cannot be overcome by modernity, since it is not only its darker side but its very *raison d'être*. (Mignolo 2003b, 456)

## I.

Niklas Luhmann's sociological systems theory has had a profound and lasting impact on the study of culture within German speaking academia. Between the time he took on his professorship in Bielefeld in 1968, famously announcing his research project as 'the theory of society; term: 30 years; costs: none' (Luhmann 2012, xi), and his death in 1998, he published innumerable books and articles on almost every aspect of modern society. He is probably best known for his series of monographs on different function systems of society such as art, economy, science, law or religion, culminating in his encompassing two-volume *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* in 1997 (literally: *The Society of Society*, translated into English under the title *Theory of Society* only in 2012 and 2013). In the Anglophone world, Luhmann received less attention until recently; in part, this has to do with the fact that his work was often dismissed as abstract, too complex and inaccessible as well as, especially when compared to Habermas, too conservative. More technically, however, translating Luhmann

has proven to be a challenging task and his work has not been readily available in English. Thus, the foundational *Soziale Systeme* of 1984 only appeared in translation as *Social Systems* in 1995, while, as mentioned above, his encompassing two-volume *Theory of Society* appeared with a lag of 15 years. Nevertheless, recent years have indeed seen a remarkable surge in Luhmann scholarship in Anglophone academic contexts, a surge that will surely intensify with the more encompassing availability of his works in translation and prominently placed introductions (cf., for example, Wellbery, Borch and Reese-Schäfer).

Our aim in this contribution is to productively engage with the abstractions and complexities of Luhmann's conceptions of society from a postcolonial perspective, with a particular focus on the explanatory powers of his sociological systems theory when it leaves the realms of Europe and ventures to describe regions of the global South. In view of its more recent global reception beyond Europe, our aim is to thus – following the lead of Dipesh Chakrabarty – *provincialize* Luhmann's system theory especially with regard to its underlying assumptions about a global “world society”. For these purposes, we intend to revisit Luhmann in the post/colonial contact zone: We wish to reread Luhmann in the context of spaces of transcultural encounter where “global designs and local histories” (Mignolo), where inclusion into and exclusion from “world society” (Luhmann) clash and interact in intricate ways. The title of our contribution, ‘Luhmann in da Contact Zone’ is deliberately ambiguous: On the one hand, we of course use ‘Luhmann’ metonymically, as representative of a highly complex theoretical design. We shall cursorily outline this design with a special focus on the notion of a singular, modern “world society”, only to confront it with the epistemic challenges of the contact zone. On the other hand, this critique will also involve the close observation of Niklas Luhman as a human observer (a category which within the logic of systems theory actually does not exist) who increasingly transpires in his late writings on exclusion in the global South. By following this dual strategy, we wish to trace an increasing fracture between one Luhmann and the other, between abstract theoretical design and personalized testimony. It is by exploring and measuring this fracture that we hope to eventually be able to map out the potential of a possibly more productive encounter between systems theory and specific strands of postcolonial theory for a pluritopic reading of global modernity.

## II.

Let us begin by recapitulating the basic assumptions behind Luhmann's sociological systems theory. It seems fair to say that among all the “supertheories” (cf. Luhmann 1995a, 4-5) formulated in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Luhmann's theory of modern society confronts us with what is surely the widest distance between theoretical abstraction and the more or less



concrete phenomena of its social analysis. It is a very long way from the formal abstraction of George Spencer-Brown's operational imperative "draw a distinction!" via the theoretical reformulation of the co-evolution of perception and consciousness on the one hand and of communication and society on the other, all the way to the description of the progressive differentiation of systems of society across modern history with all their various semantics which emerge from processes of self-observation and self-description. Still, there is a single common motif that pervades all theoretical levels of inquiry: the operation of observing an "unobservable world" (cf. Luhmann 2012, 24 and 87).

Put very simply, "operation" in systems theory marks the basic existence of systems and the continuous, autopoietic reproduction of its elements, while "observation" denotes a particular mode of operation which allows systems to gain and process information based on drawing distinctions. Observation, in other words, is the specific operational mode of meaning-constituting systems. Since only an observer can speak of operations, systems theory translates the 'decisionist ur-scene' (Jahraus 83, our trans.) in Spencer Brown's mathematical-formalistic "draw a distinction!" into a basically infinite process of generating and processing information; at the same time, by distinguishing and indicating, the same process necessarily also excludes an "unmarked space" as the "backside" or darker side of the distinction (cf. Spencer-Brown). It is vital to note here that systems theory insists that observing the world should and must not be anthropomorphized; instead, systems theory defines observation in strictly formalized terms: in *Theory of Society*, Luhmann stresses that the concept of "observation" 'is used highly abstractly and independently of the material substratum, the infrastructure, or the specific mode of operation that enable observations to be carried out' (Luhmann 2012, 34; on the general constructivist framework cf. Luhmann 2006a).

What is striking in view of these basic premises of systems theory is an ever-increasing rigor in the conceptual treatment of the "border" between systems and their environment. In his early *Social Systems*, Luhmann establishes the notion of strictly autopoietic systems in which the generation of meaning (*Sinn*) is by definition limited to and thrown back upon the system itself and its formalized recursive operations. In systems theory the environment may be observed by way of external reference; however, in order not to endanger systemic autopoiesis, inferences from the systemic environment are generally reduced to an 'unspecific (meaningless) "noise"' (Luhmann 2012, 32) – noise, what is more, which itself may only be observed as an internal construction of an elusive extra-systemic Other. In *Social Systems*, the specific metaphorical repertoire to demarcate such borders still implies a certain degree of permeability – Luhmann speaks of 'membranes, skins, walls and

doors, boundary posts and points of contact' (Luhmann 1995a, 29) to illustrate the self-generated boundaries of social systems. Such permeability is gradually displaced by a rhetoric of rigorous closure, however, owing to an ever increasing conceptual emphasis on the strictly autopoietic recursiveness of systemic observation and distinction. In his last work, *Theory of Society*, Luhmann thus stresses: 'Observations can only affect observations, [...] can, in other words, only process information; but they cannot touch things of the environment.' (Luhmann 2012, 49) To compensate the increasing absoluteness of his systemic borders, Luhmann takes recourse to Humberto Maturana's notion of "structural coupling": While it remains impossible that the environment of any one system influences the system, the environment may well be a precondition for the functioning of systemic communication. The structural coupling of systems matters not least when it comes to explanations of "exclusion" to which we will turn shortly. First, however, let us turn to the basic relations between social systems, society, and world society in Luhmann's design.

The structural extension of a social system correlates directly with the reach of what Luhmann calls "communication". The probability of communication, here, is essentially a function of specific media: The medium of language affects the level of understanding, dissemination media affect questions of reach, while symbolically generalized media of communication (such as power, money, or love) affect the acceptance of communication in terms of their compatibility with specific systems. Based on the fundamental observation that the global reach of especially the mass media has led to the global extension of all levels of communication, Luhmann relatively early on in his career ventured to promote the system "society" to a "world society" (cf. Luhmann 2012, 83-99). From the perspective of systems theory, society famously demarcates the one system which encompasses all communication. Based on this definition, then, "world society" cannot have a social exterior or Other: According to a strictly Luhmannian logic, it is impossible to assume that there are worlds which exist outside of the self-referentially emergent borders of modernity, simply because there is no communication beyond modernity that systems theory would or could recognize.

### III.

The starting point for our postcolonial critique of systems theory is the realization – first substantially formulated by major proponents within systems theory in the early to mid-1990s – that the presumed globality of autopoietic function systems apparently does not hold for all parts of the "world". 'Looking at the facts', Luhmann is propelled to admit in a 1995 essay on inclusion and exclusion, 'one can easily see that in many countries – especially in developing countries, but also in highly industrialized countries like Brazil and, to a lesser

extent, in the United States – a significant part of the population is forced to spend their lives under conditions of exclusion’ (Luhmann 1995b, 259, our trans.). Now, the (contested) notion of “exclusion” in systems theory provides excellent food for postcolonial thought.

What is exclusion in systems theoretical perspective? To begin with, it is the structural counterpart to inclusion. What is crucial about *inclusion* in systems theory is that it is no longer conceived as a task that involves society as a whole in the logic of a functionally differentiated world society, but operates strictly on the level of its various function systems. How *exclusion* then happens is interpreted differently by different thinkers within systems theory: Luhmann himself assumes that in what he refers to as ‘realms of exclusion’, inclusion fails when individuals are ‘(too) highly integrated’ into singular function systems (such as, for example, religion); this in turn triggers the cumulative exclusion/dropout/expulsion from other function systems, as he tends to illustrate with casual examples: ‘An example from India: Families living on the street with no fixed address cannot register their children for school.’ (Luhmann 1995b, 259, our trans.)

Irrespective of how they are interpreted, realms of exclusion pose a conundrum to any systems theorist: After all, persons living in realms of exclusion are out of reach as objects of communication, and they thus dodge the possibility of being observed and processed by systems which by definition remain reflexively bent back upon themselves. Luhmann accordingly states that the ‘logic of functional differentiation seems to become [...] inconsistent with the facts of exclusion’ and concludes: ‘the distinction of inclusion (with loose integration) and exclusion (with fixed integration) provides a “supercode” for society from which you have to take your bearings first if you want to find your way’ (Luhmann 1995b, 260, our trans.). This admission, for us, is a far-reaching intervention: Even if he does not make it overtly explicit, the statement marks nothing less than a farewell to the notion of world society. Or put differently: In his late essays, Luhmann concedes that society does after all have a meaningful external or Other which consistently eludes systemic observations and operations.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, this late concession has not found much support among those who administer Luhmann’s legacy. A case in point is Rudolf Stichweh, a sociologist of the Luhmann school who most intensely devoted himself to the further development of the exclusion/inclusion paradigm. Stichweh attempts to save Luhmann from his own later statements by outright disavowing his thesis that ‘the differentiation of inclusion and exclusion becomes a primary differentiation which comes before functional differentiation’ (Stichweh 2006, 58, our trans.). Almost impatiently, Stichweh insists: ‘Today’s world society

does not leave any socially unoccupied spaces, and thus there is no outside of society into which addresses which are to be excluded could be expelled – and particularly not in the form of other societies.’ (Stichweh 2009, 37, our trans.) On the basis of this categorical assumption he describes exclusion as a problem of structural coupling between systems under the premises of ‘highly specific regional conditions’ (Stichweh 2009, 37, our trans.). Regional realms of exclusion, he argues, are by definition not globally interconnected, and consequentially exclusion, understood as a ‘multidimensional, cumulative and sequentially interconnected process of exclusion from a majority of functional systems’ (Stichweh 2006, 45, our trans.), cannot be conceived as a phenomenon that antecedes society. Rather, exclusion strictly emerges within a functionally differentiated world society, based on the notion ‘that modern society, like all societies, creates its own counterstructures’ (Stichweh 2009, 40, our trans.).

#### IV.

The different interpretation of realms of exclusion and their relation to the conception of world society by Luhmann and Stichweh is significant. What is more, it obviously tinges the way in which both theorists approach realms of exclusion rhetorically. It transpires that Stichweh is much more devoted to what Albrecht Koschorke calls the “desire for purity” (*Reinheitsbegehren*, cf. Koschorke 49) in systems theory than Luhmann himself. According to Stichweh, one can only speak about exclusion if there are “residual interconnections” with the realm of inclusion – wherever such links with the systemic centre are missing, observation is strictly speaking impossible:

For these realms of exclusion the physical analogy of ‘black holes’ suggests itself, turning the world into a kind of universe interspersed with ‘black holes’. Occasionally, something drops into them. When you come near them, the danger increases that you will not be able to extricate yourself from their pull. Never (or very rarely) does anything return from inside. They are nearly unobservable, because even the energy which you invest into observing them does not return. Due to this, we know nearly nothing about their internal structure. (Stichweh 2006, 59, our trans.)

Stichweh insists on the ‘physical analogy’ of the “black hole”, because ‘the radicality of its premises exposes the limits of a sociological model’ (Stichweh 2006, 59, our trans.). Yet what is difficult to ignore here, are the almost uncanny resonances of imperial topoi underneath the seemingly innocent metaphorical recourse to the natural sciences. Allow us a brief excursion to the most (in)famous colonial metaphor of imperial exclusion in Anglophone literature to argue our case.

If Stichweh points out that society has no exterior anymore, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* similarly makes it very clear from the start that the white patches on those maps

over which Charlie Marlowe sat mesmerized in his childhood have long disappeared by the time he embarks on his ventures in the Belgian Congo. Once Marlowe has ‘drop[ped] into’ the realm of exclusion (which in Conrad is of course both primordial *and* a consequence of functionally differentiated globalization in intricate ways), *Heart of Darkness*, too, dramatizes an overwhelming ‘danger [...] that you will not be able to extricate yourself’ (Stichweh 2006, 59, our trans.). Surely, Conrad’s observer manages to ‘return from inside’ the heart of darkness again, but indeed, as in Stichweh’s diagnosis, not before the realm of exclusion has sucked all energy from him – and it does not seem far-fetched, too, to read energy here as the energy invested in vainly observing an elusive Other which constantly dodges enlightened modernity’s taxonomies of distinction. Marlowe escapes from his encounter with the heart of darkness stripped down to bare life, and can finally tell his story on board the cruising yawl *Nellie* on the river Thames, back in the very heart of functionally differentiated modernity, represented not least by his select audience (all former seamen, now lawyer, accountant, manager, writer).

No doubt, any viable systems theorist would protest and object to this analogy, arguing that it is based on an illegitimate confusion of categories: Bare life and embodiment, realms of exclusion as concrete territorial space, the observer as an anthropomorphic figure – all this has nothing to do with the semantics of exclusion and observation in systems theory. Granted – however, what is important for our intervention into sociological systems theory is that Luhmann himself persistently performed a very similar confusion of categories in his late writings on exclusion. In another of his 1995 essays, ‘Beyond Barbarism’, Luhmann for instance writes:

To the surprise of the well-meaning it must be ascertained that exclusion still exists, and it exists on a massive scale and in such forms of misery that they are beyond description. Anybody who dares a visit to the *favelas* of South American cities and escapes alive can talk about this. [...] To this effect, no empirical research is needed. Who trusts one’s eyes can see it, and can see it so impressively that all explanations at hand will fail. (Luhmann 2006b, 269)

Such statements have repeatedly irritated Luhmann’s systems theoretical readers. The later Luhmann, the lament goes, falls prey to an ‘impressionism of sociological description’ (Opitz 190, our trans.) in his writings on exclusion, an impressionism that is thoroughly at odds with the almost pedantic insistence on categorical precision in his oeuvre at large. What is it, then, in Luhmann’s writings on exclusion, that motivates “literary” ruptures of such Conradian quality within the otherwise so sober and formalistic calculus of systems theoretical observation?

As Sina Farzin has carefully analysed, Luhmann's essays on exclusion are marked by a distinct 'intensification of imagery, illustrative metaphors and concrete case descriptions' (Farzin 2008, 192, our trans.) which deliberately break with his own conventions of academic writing. Take the passage quoted above: Surely, Luhmann's 'anybody' visiting the Brazilian favelas and Conrad's Marlowe are much closer to each other than Stichweh would be prepared to accept. After all, as Farzin points out about Luhmann's observer: 'The observer of exclusion is not a self-referential system of whatever kind but clearly anthropomorphic. He must be able to fear for his life and to trust his own eyes, and he must have the ability to narrate if he wants to report what he sees.' (Farzin 2008, 204, our trans.) This "re-naturalised" observer – who is "impressed" by, and ultimately testifies to, what he has seen – becomes a recurring figure in Luhmann's work on exclusion, a figure which is persistently employed to vouch for the "visibility" of the realm of exclusion which must by definition remain invisible to the operations of social systems. Farzin closes her analysis with the observation that the 'boundary between system and environment, which is predicated on exclusiveness and insuperableness, is persistently undermined by the form in which social exclusion is observed' (Farzin 2008, 207, our trans.). From a postcolonial perspective, however, it is difficult not to carry the implications much further.

We argue that the apparent discursive fracture in Luhmann's writings should be understood as a fundamental marker of unease with the version and vision of modernity brought forth by his own systems theory. It seems that Luhmann felt no longer at ease within the universal aspirations of his theoretical design, owing to the fact that he found it increasingly impossible to deny the existence of socially significant "worlds" outside of (or within) functionally differentiated modernity, while simultaneously having to concede that their significance eludes the systemic logic of his model. This unease markedly sets him apart from most other proponents of contemporary systems theory – but of course it hardly makes him a postcolonial thinker either. As for Conrad, for Luhmann, too, Europe remains the centre of theoretical observation and operation, and this is nowhere as blatantly evident as in his accounts of exclusion in the South. Take the following characteristic sentence, for instance: 'When [...] you stay in Brazilian cities, and you move on streets, squares, beaches, a constant observation of the position, distance and number of human bodies is an indispensable competence.' (Luhmann 1995b, 262, our trans.) Who is the generalized observing 'you' here? Surely, 'you' is not someone who is from the South; instead, we are obviously dealing with an anthropomorphic observer – call him "Luhmann" – who slips back and forth across the

borders and laws of his theoretical design, and who – not unlike Marlowe on the Nellie – tells those who like to listen about his impressions “in the realm of exclusion”:

When the other (and consequentially oneself) counts primarily as a body, the danger for life and limb increases. Besides, there is no correlation between body relevance and specific function systems with their respective symbolically generalized media of communication. Physical violence, sexuality, animalistic primary satisfaction of needs become freely available again (i.e. without taking heed of symbolic recursions), and this prevents communication of a more sophisticated kind. (Luhmann 1995b, 263, our trans.)

It is impossible, surely, to miss the chilling proximity of such accounts of Southern “realms of exclusion” to the characteristic ideological projections of colonial travel writing (bare life, threatening physicality, disease, primitive sexuality, and so on), a proximity that places Luhmann in an uncomfortably continuity with imperial epistemologies which further legitimate our brief digression to Conrad. Yet the major conceptual challenge to systems theory is this: Which authority accounts for all the observations and distinctions? If ‘functional differentiation cannot order its realm of exclusion in spite of the fact that according to its socio-universal self-conception it should actually include it’ (Luhmann 1995b, 260, our trans.), who then “orders” these observations? Or put differently: Who speaks, from where, for whom, here, and produces what sort of knowledge by, in the lingo of systems theory, taking recourse to which symbolically generalized media of communication?

V.

The widening gap between Luhmann and Luhmann in the contact zone – the curious split between the abstract theoretical design of systems theory on the one hand, and Luhmann as an anthropomorphic observer on the other – is precisely the space in which we would like to develop a postcolonial intervention into the ways in which systems theory constructs its notion of global modernity. Systems theory and theoretical approaches commonly labelled as postcolonial have been set against one another before (see, for example, the contributions in Grizelj/Kirschstein) and some of the most prominent systems theorists have turned to postcolonial debates in their work (see, for example, Stäheli/Stichweh). This mainly pertains, however, to postcolonial approaches which have been widely canonized in Western academia and are typically indebted to poststructuralist thought (most notably the work of Homi Bhabha). By way of contrast, we will in the following foreground select aspects of the work of Argentinian theorist Walter D. Mignolo, whose writing is strongly influenced by a range of “postcolonial” thinkers less familiar in Western curricula, among them Enrique Dussel, Anibal Quijano or Rudolfo Kusch in the Latin Americas, Edouard Glissant in the francophone Caribbean, Abdelkhebir Khatibi and Hélé Béji in Northern Africa; or Ranajit Guha and other

members of the Indian Subaltern Studies Group. Building on these voices, Mignolo's conceptions of difference in *The Darker Side of the Renaissance* (1995), *Local Histories/Global Designs* (2000) and *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* (2011) challenge systems theory in intricate ways.

Mignolo's work is of particular interest in this context as his observations of the modern world are distinctly informed by ideas from within the realm of systems theory, if not via Luhmann, then via Humberto Maturana. Unlike Luhmann, Maturana conceives of the distinguishing observer not as both the origin and motor of an autopoietic system, but as an external unit uncoupled from the dynamics of systemic autopoiesis (cf. Hayles). Mignolo accordingly conceives of second-order observation in ways fundamentally different from Luhmann's: The differentiating observation of the observation is not a strictly formalized, inner-systemic operation, but a distinctly *social* act, an act which attends to the 'positionality and politicization of the understanding subject and his or her drive to know or understand' (Mignolo 2003a, 24). This is of particular importance as, for Mignolo, difference is generated not *within* systemic boundaries, but precisely by the epistemic frictions *between* systems in concrete transcultural encounters. In Mignolo's analysis, colonial difference was constitutive of early European self-observations as "modern" during the first phase of accelerated globalization, but its role was eclipsed by the universalizing cultural narratives of the Enlightenment of which systems theory is an heir. It is therefore paramount to re-emphasize 'the mobility of the centre, the power to speak or write, and the construction of loci of enunciation' (Mignolo 2003a, 24-5). In other words: this entails that we need to relocate modern difference, the location from which it is observed and the ways in which it is operationalized in the colonial *contact zone*. We use this term with reference to Mary Louise Pratt's coinage in her work on *Travel Writing and Transculturation*, where it is defined as 'the space of colonial encounters, the space in which people geographically and historically separated came into contact with each other and established ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict'. (Pratt 6) If we indeed reconceive modern difference as fundamentally generated in the contact zone, we need to thoroughly rethink the foundations of Luhmann's systems theory.

This first and most fundamentally concerns the 'decisionist ur-scene' (Jahraus 83, our trans.) of systems theory. The imperative "draw a distinction!" can no longer be conceived of as largely disinterested and distanced, or, in the wake of Spencer-Brown, as a purely formalized operation following a simple binary logic. Instead, drawing a distinction needs to be read as a performative act; an act whose epistemic ordering function is always tied to



specific observers in very specific socio-historical situations of contact. Difference, in this scenario, does not simply “emerge” within a system, but it is a reflex of the confrontation with an Other to which the observer relates in concrete historical situations. As such, difference may advance to become the recursive motor of a specific social system; yet it can only do so by persistently relating to this Other which it excludes. Precisely by performatively excluding the systemic Other, it is paradoxically included as the system’s “darker side”: “Drawing a distinction” in this sense is never innocent; rather, it is inevitably also an imperial gesture whose epistemic ordering function remains tied to a specific locus of observation, while it either negates other possible loci, or sets them radically into perspective.

It seems fair to say that systems theoretical reflections on modernity are largely devoid of any level of reflexivity about their locus of enunciation from within the hegemonic centre of Western modernity. This is nowhere more obvious than in the ways in which systems theorists have dealt with the “realms of exclusion” of world society. Within the totalitarian border regime of advanced systems theory, the observation of observation is not only thrown back upon the *act* of observation in the first degree, but crucially also on its monocentric *location*. This, however, makes systems theory very susceptible to an epistemic complicity with the imperial logic of Western (neo)colonialism. Put differently, systems theory unreflectingly tends to reproduce a Eurocentric image of the modern, an image in which since the Enlightenment any other “locus of enunciation beyond the logic of modernity” is adamantly disavowed, and “even when disavowed” radically set in dependence to the default locus of the modern in an ever increasingly hegemonic world order. Mignolo concludes that ‘[t]he simultaneous logic of disavowal and dependency of all possible loci of enunciation (from religious to economic, from legal to political, from ethical to erotic) is the hidden logic of modernity, the logic that justifies its place as guiding light and point of arrival, on the one hand, and of disavowal and dependency on the other’ (Mignolo 2003b, 441-2). Systems theory, to this day, has largely perpetuated this logic.

## VI.

How may systems theory be reformulated from a postcolonial perspective in such a way that it no longer reiterates the “hidden logic of modernity”? Surely what is at stake here is not playing out one theoretical paradigm against another. A postcolonial critique of systems theory should not aim at completely throwing overboard the observation of a world society which has evolved according to the structuring principles of functional differentiation which have shaped Europe over the past 400 years. The global reach of function systems of this kind can hardly be denied; however – and this is crucial – it is mandatory that systems theory give

up the ‘socio-universal self-conception [...] of the logic of functional differentiation’ (Luhmann 1995b, 260, our trans.). Rather, we should conceive of such function systems as “global designs” in Mignolo’s sense, which interact on all levels with “local histories” in complex ways (cf. Mignolo 2000).

Such local histories are always already entangled with global modernity, as they hardly ever exist in isolation from, but in intricate relation to global function systems. Luhmann himself affirms this when he argues that ‘the problems which are topical today – from problems of hunger and political corruption to the emergence of new religious cults – are by no means relics of a bygone order, but rather direct correlates of modernity itself’, and goes on to comment: ‘Typically, the function systems of world society intensify found inequalities, as it is rational for them to make use of differences’ (Luhmann 1995c, 19. Our trans.). The point is, however, that the complexities of modernity cannot be adequately described if such “found inequalities and differences” – following Pratt and Mignolo these would be the fault lines of the contact zone, in which global designs and local histories clash and generate difference – are only observed from the locus of enunciation that marks the “zero point epistemology” of the global designs. If we subscribe to the idea that modernity constitutes itself in the interaction between global designs and local histories (or in systems theory’s most extreme test case: between society and realms of exclusion), then we also need strategies of observation and description that are pluri-perspectival and reciprocal, we need an epistemic model which transcends the absolutist border metaphors of systems theory. Following Michel Foucault, Darcy Ribeiro (“subjugated knowledges”) and Ranajit Guha (“subaltern knowledges”), Mignolo frames this as the necessity of “border gnosis” or “colonial semiosis”. ‘Colonial semiosis’, argues Mignolo,

attempt[s] to identify particular moments of tension in the conflict between two local histories and knowledges, one responding to the movement forward of a global design that intended to impose itself and those local histories and knowledges that are forced to accommodate themselves to such new realities. Thus, colonial semiosis requires a *pluritopic* hermeneutics since in the conflict, in the cracks and fissures where the conflict originates, a description of one side of the epistemological divide won’t do. (Mignolo 2000, 17, our emphasis)

This surely matters not only in view of the historical dimensions of a global modernity, but also in view of the descriptions of its presences and futures. Whoever really wishes to learn more about the varieties of the modern in today’s urban peripheries in the South, for instance, should not stumble into the black holes of Stichweh’s reasoning, nor should he or she believe in the testimonies of Luhmann, the man who travels beyond his own system. Instead, studies like Ravi Sundaram’s *Pirate Modernity* demonstrate compellingly that there are complex

social worlds beyond “world society” which can hardly be observed from the epistemic centres of systems theory in Luzern or Bielefeld, yet which are hardly less, and perhaps even more “modern”. In the concrete example of Sundaram’s study, these are large parts of urban Delhi which participate in the global flows of media and technologies piratically – that is by strategically bypassing the global function systems of law, economics, or art. Underground markets like Delhi’s Palika Bazaar or Nehru’s Place, this is to argue, are sites of tradition and of (hyper)modernity at the same time, of exclusion from and inclusion into global function systems; they are contact zones in which local histories and global designs are perpetually (re)negotiated in intricate ways (Sundaram 97-102 and, more generally, Eckstein/Schwarz). How super is a “supertheory” whose dynamics of self-observation and self-description cannot grasp – or only unilaterally grasp – such paradigmatic phenomena of global modernity? Niklas Luhmann’s late essays on exclusion indicate that he grappled with this question; systems theory after Luhmann yet needs to come up with compelling answers in order to live up to its encompassing epistemic aspirations in a globalized world.

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