1 Introduction: differentiation theory and international relations

Mathias Albert, Barry Buzan and Michael Zürn

Bringing Sociology to International Relations (IR) sounds like an endeavour doomed to failure. One might object in the first place that it has been always there. Some of the most influential figures in IR in the 1960s and 1970s such as Hedley Bull (1977; 'international society'), Karl W. Deutsch (1969; 'communication' and 'community') and Morten Kaplan (1957; 'systems analysis') used key concepts from Sociology. In Germany and France, many prominent figures working on IR like Dieter Senghaas (see Senghaas, 1971) and Raymond Aron (see Aron, 1966) were even considered (Senghaas), or explicitly figured (Aron), as sociologists. And today the term sociological institutionalism points to a school of thought which – as opposed to rational institutionalism – prefers constructivist theorizing and covers a significant share of IR scholarship. One might also object that it is impossible to bring the whole richness of approaches and thinking in Sociology to IR. The ambition to bring Sociology to IR thus would per se be in vain. Both objections are correct.

What this book does is, indeed, much more modest, though still ambitious: it argues that the understanding of IR can benefit from taking into account a specific sociological theory – differentiation theory – in order to grasp the dynamics underlying structural change in the global social realm. 'Differentiation', in the broadest sense, refers to the form and structure of a large-scale social entity, traditionally 'society':[1] that is, how and on the basis of which structuring principle, are the main units within a social system (or subsystem) defined and distinguished from one another. More specifically, we can discriminate at least three forms of this process (Buzan and Albert, 2010: 318): *segmentary* differentiation is where every social subsystem is equal, and functionally similar, to every other social subsystem; s*tratificatory* differentiation is

[1] Although the term 'functional differentiation', in particular, is quite prominent in research on rather small-scale units, especially in biology. For links between biological and sociological thought during the inception of differentiation theory thought, see the contribution by Stichweh in this volume.

where some persons or groups raise themselves above others, creating a hierarchical social order; *functional* differentiation is where the subsystems are defined by the coherence of particular types of activity and their differentiation from other types of activity, and these differences do not stem simply from rank.

With these conceptual tools to hand, two general reasons for an engagement with differentiation theory in IR become obvious. First, differentiation theory is probably the most general theory of social change, and this is needed in IR; second, international politics cannot be treated in isolation from its broader social environment. Once that is acknowledged, then it is plausible to look more closely at what concepts the sociological toolbox might have to offer. More specifically, the attraction of using an approach based on differentiation theory is that it allows one to analyse changes on a macro level by using the coherent and highly durable framing of an interplay between various forms of differentiation. Such an analytical language immediately overcomes some of the conceptually barren debates that currently confuse IR on whether the international system is 'Westphalian' or 'post-Westphalian' (it is both, in that both segmentary differentiation into territorial states as well as other forms of differentiation play a role in ordering the global political system), or on whether the nation-state is 'out' or 'in'. Differentiation theory is not only helpful for understanding change *within* an international system of states, but also in studying the historical and contemporary changes *of* such a system in its social environment.

The term differentiation theory requires some explanation as it designates two different, albeit closely related, things. On the one hand, there is a relatively small set of sociological approaches which are more or less explicit theories of the differentiation of society. This would particularly include much of Talcott Parson's and Niklas Luhmann's work – and in the tradition of the latter a significant chunk of theorizing in contemporary German Sociology (see the chapters by Münch and Stichweh in this volume) – as well as an important Anglo-Saxon strand of sociological research – Jeffrey Alexander and Shmuel Eisenstadt may serve as reference names – which aimed to integrate actors and conflicts into the theory (see Eisenstadt, 1963; Alexander and Colomy, 1990). On the other hand, much of classical Sociology has always been about the (mostly functional) differentiation of society, without the term being used explicitly. Differentiation thus has always been at the core of sociological thought about the emergence and evolution of modern society. The movement from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* is, in Sociology, almost constitutively associated with functional differentiation. The forms and pathways of what, in various guises, appears as the 'division of labour', 'specialization', 'role

differentiation' etc., point to the recognition that some kind of *functional* differentiation is a defining feature of *modern* society.

In this view, modern society is distinguished from pre-modern societies in that *segmentary* differentiation between families, clans and local communities, and *stratificatory* differentiation marked by hierarchies of class, caste or race, are superseded as the *dominant* form of social structure by *functional* differentiation (into politics, the economy, law etc.) that encompasses society as a whole. In this account 'society' is essentially *national* society.[2] This also means that approaches in classical Sociology were primarily concerned with the question of what holds society together despite the disintegrating forces exerted by functional differentiation – a guiding question in sociological theorizing. The answers to this question differ, but invariably focus on some variation of the *Gemeinschaft* theme, that is, a shared identity or common norms and values (e.g. Parson's 'societal community' or Habermas's 'lifeworld'; see Habermas, 1981; Parsons, 1999).

Unfortunately, sociological theory has only rarely transposed thinking about differentiation and its consequences explicitly to the global level, although it has taken up issues of globalization in various ways. The main exception here is Luhmannian systems theory, which relies on a strong and explicit differentiation theory for analysing world society. However, even here, thinking through world society in terms of differentiation theory has remained more of a theoretical postulate and has not been translated into extensive forms of empirical analysis. Moreover, these analyses have never tried to relate to concepts used in IR theory.[3]

This is all the more a pity as thinking in terms of differentiation promises to provide a powerful conceptual tool to analyse the current form and the evolution of both world society and the international political system. We understand world society here not in the sense of a particular theoretical tradition, but as referring to a global social realm broadly conceived, of which the political system is an important, but by no means the only, part. Such a broad notion involves both understandings of society, based either on the potentiality of communication or on some commonality of norms and/or cognitive scripts. However, it is important to point out at the beginning of this book that while the *functional* differentiation of the social world – into politics, economy, law, art, sport etc. – forms an obvious part of social reality (independent of the precise understanding of world society), there can be no doubt that other

[2] Of course, there are suggestions for another reading of, for instance, Durkheim (see e.g. Inglis and Robertson, 2008).
[3] See the contributions in Albert and Hilkermeier (2004) for a detailed discussion.

forms of differentiation, most notably stratification (bosses, leaders, great powers, nuclear weapon states, cores, empires) and segmentation (family, clan, tribe, nation, state) play an important role too. This being the case, utilizing a differentiation theory perspective requires us not only to debate the primacy of a specific kind of differentiation, but also to inquire into *the specific ways in which different forms of differentiation overlap and interact with each other*.

It would be wrong to claim that differentiation has so far played no role at all in IR, even though the assertion by Kenneth Waltz that the international political system is *not* differentiated functionally may make it seem so. Beneath the discipline's founding idea that the international system is essentially a system of states, lies the claim that a segmentary differentiation into states is more important than functional differentiation. Yet functional differentiation implicitly plays an important role when, as is commonly done, an international *legal* or an international *economic* system, or an international or world *society*, are distinguished from an international *political* system. Similarly, although the segmentary signifier of anarchy is privileged in IR discussions of political structure, there is no escape from the stratificatory differentiation of great powers and hegemons from the ordinary run of other states, a distinction central to all forms of realist and English School thinking, and many liberal ones too (see e.g. Hurrell, 2007: chap. 7). The distinction between core and periphery common to dependency theory, and to some historical Sociology and International Political Economy (IPE) also reflects a key stratificatory differentiation.[4] How these three forms of differentiation can be thought of together – and what it is exactly that is differentiated – has, however, largely escaped the attention of the otherwise lively theoretical debates in the discipline.

This book, therefore, starts from the assumption that IR has a lot to gain from thinking in differentiation theory terms. We think, moreover, that sociological analyses of world society also have something to gain: first, by taking into account empirical analyses of the changing structures of world politics and the varying forms of differentiation expressed therein, and, second, by confronting the issues that in IR are dealt with as levels of analysis. This book also starts from the observation that the debates about a 'primacy' of this or that form of differentiation in world society, while being heuristically useful in describing long-term

[4] Luhmann adds some accounts of the core–periphery differentiation as a fourth type of differentiation (see Luhmann, 1990b: 423; see also both Münch, this volume, and Kessler and Kratochwil, this volume: footnote 1). We see the core–periphery differentiation, however, as a subtype of stratificatory differentiation without denying that it may be useful for some purposes to consider it separately.

historical trends in the evolution of modern (world) society, have not proven very useful in guiding more specific analyses of the changing forms of world society. Rather than pursuing the question of which (if any) form of differentiation reigns primary in world society, we argue that the analytical strengths of the vocabulary of differentiation theory can be played out most effectively if it is used in order to ask how *different forms of differentiation* emerge, become more or less important, change over time, and interact with each other.[5] Asking this question moves one away from overly abstract and agency-free structural-functionalist theorizing and brings actors and resistance to functional differentiation into the picture as well.

Part of the attraction of using differentiation theory thought in the context of IR is that it challenges the traditional state-centric definition of what the international system is, while not eliminating the role of clearly demarcated sovereign territorial states. A differentiation framing allows for a double constituency of the international system consisting of states and society and the simultaneous presence of different forms of differentiation alongside, and even *within*, the political system of world society. A differentiation approach allows one to think more thoroughly about the question of the basis on which such a *political* system is differentiated from other (e.g. economic, legal, scientific etc.) systems within a broader social context. If one conceives the political system as the realm of collectively binding decisions, how does it relate for instance to the economic sphere? Of course, answers here can vary widely according to the underlying social theory used (e.g. Marxism or pluralism, or whether the whole is integrated by a public sphere or not). But, irrespective of these underlying theoretical positions, it seems clear that functional differentiation means that different, functionally defined systems work to a significant extent according to their own (economic, political, legal etc.) 'logic'. If the international system is understood as consisting of multiple function systems rather than just one (the political), this opens the way to the conclusion that such a system will require an extensive and possibly increasing amount of coordination across these function systems if it is to remain coherent.[6]

[5] This also means that, in general, we would not make such a strong distinction between 'type' and 'dimension' approaches as Jack Donnelly does in his contribution to this volume. Even in 'type' approaches there is no hiding the fact that historically different forms of differentiation always existed at the same time.

[6] In the remainder, we use the term 'system' in 'function system' to refer to sectoral settings like economy, politics, law etc. We thus follow the Luhmannian terminology. In this theory, each of these systems is autonomous and autopoietic and thus not part of a larger system. Those who see function systems as part of a social whole (i.e. society), which is based on at least some minimal form of normative and cognitive integration, tend

In addition, as much as the notion of functional differentiation helps and requires one to address the relation *between* different function systems of society, it also helps to conceptualize developments *within* single function systems, namely, in our case, the political system. Thus, while no one would dispute that *segmentation* continues to play a very important role as the form of differentiation of the political system of world society into territorial states, other forms of differentiation also play an important role within the political system. World politics is *stratified*, both in a formal sense through the prime responsibility of the UN Security Council for the preservation of peace, and in an informal sense through the claims of great powers to translate the unequal distribution of powers into special roles and privileges. It is *functionally differentiated*, both in the more narrow sense of role differentiation (some states serving as leaders or providers of collective goods, others as followers or neutral states etc.) and in a more general sense in that political communication and decision making are increasingly structured along functionally defined issue areas in the form of international regimes such as the climate regime, the free trade regime etc. In fact, one could argue that most of the process of 'global governance' can be understood in terms of a restructuring of the political systems in terms of functionally defined problem solving. Some speak in this context of fragmentation (Fischer-Lescano and Teubner, 2004; Benvenisti and Downs, 2007).

The purpose of this book is to take up a recently begun debate on differentiation theory in IR (see e.g. Zürn, 2007a; Donnelly, 2009; Buzan and Albert, 2010), enlist some additional sociological input for this purpose, and explore what this vocabulary can add to our understanding of IR. This is not merely an exercise in 'importing' sociological insights into IR. What is required is a dialogue between IR and Sociology about what is actually being studied, that is, how notions of an 'international system' or 'international relations' or 'international society' relate to notions of '(world) society', 'world polity' etc. These very general issues form the background for the following chapters, and we will return to them more explicitly in the concluding chapter. In this context, the contributions to this book pursue three main themes, each led by a guiding question:

1. In what relation do the three basic forms of differentiation stand to each other? Classical social theory suggests that one form should

to use the term 'subsystem'. While we use the Luhmannian terminology here, where a 'subsystem' could only be a subsystem of a function system, we do not necessarily follow the conceptualization of social systems as autopoietic and not part of a social whole; see Albert *et al*. (2010) on the varieties of systems thought in IR.

normally be dominant, and that segmentary, stratificatory and functional differentiation can therefore be used to identify fundamental types of social order. Applying this theoretical framework to the large and relatively lightly integrated subject matter of an international system/society suggests that all three basic types of differentiation are strongly in play, and that what matters is the mixtures and dispositions among them. For example, as just argued, one finds segmentary, stratificatory and functional differentiation within the functionally differentiated realm of politics. For IR, modernity, therefore, cannot just be about the displacement of stratification by functional differentiation as the dominant social form. Moreover, the question arises about the relationship between detailed differentiation within individual sectors and general differentiation between them. Is a growing division of labour within the political system a consequence or a cause of growing functional differentiation in the international system/society overall?

2. Assuming that functional differentiation is in play, what is the relationship of different functionally defined subsystems/sectors to each other? Are function systems/sectors autonomous and equal? Or do some have special features that put them somehow above the others: e.g. law (as argued for by global constitutionalists), politics (as argued for by realists), or economy (as argued for by Marxists)? Is the political system different from others in that it coordinates the different subsystems? In this view, the political system not only interacts with other social systems, it aspires to regulate all social systems. Or does the collective interdependence among functionally differentiated realms mean that they cannot be thought about in either of these ways? What actually constitutes the political subsystem and how does it relate to the legal system?
3. Since differentiation theory is a logic of division, what is it that integrates a social whole sufficiently for it to be thought of as a whole: a system or a society? This is particularly important for the subject matter of international relations, where, in contrast to the domestic realm, it is generally easier to think of the whole as being emergent rather than something pre-existing and primal. The domestic realm comes with a sense of community because it is assumed to have emerged from a process beginning with segmentary differentiation. The international realm has no such starting coherence, instead coming into being as a result of rising interactions, and this raises several questions. Is the integration merely mechanical connectedness? Is it, as the English School would claim, somehow framed by an ideology or set of values that legitimizes particular forms of differentiation, just as liberalism supports functional differentiation, aristocratic rule supports

stratificatory differentiation and sovereigntism supports segmentary differentiation? Does it arise as a natural product of the interdependence created by differentiation when mechanical connectedness is in play? Or, indeed, is it justified to speak of integration at all here, or is society a 'social whole' which is characterized by a multiplicity of heterogeneities without a common denominator?

The next section will introduce some basic notions of differentiation theory and examine how it has fared so far in IR theory. We will then show how much of what has been analysed in terms of institutionalization and globalization in IR can, through the lens of differentiation theory, be interpreted as a weakening of segmentary differentiation within the political system of world society. In the next two sections, we raise the issue to what extent the weakening of segmentary differentiation gets translated into the increasing importance of functional and stratificatory differentiation. Moreover, a particular analytical challenge is posed by functional differentiation, because it requires the making of a clear distinction between processes *within* the functionally differentiated realm of *politics* and processes in other functionally defined realms of society (and of course their relation to each other). This introduction will conclude by giving a brief overview of the chapters that follow this one.

1 Differentiation theory and the theory of international politics

As Jeffrey Alexander (1990: 1) aptly observed, differentiation plays a major role in the evolution of the social world, though '[o]bviously, not all social change is differentiation'. Differentiation, and particularly functional differentiation (or, in traditional parlance, the 'division of labour') has been and continues to be a running theme of sociological theory and, more specifically, of theories of society. From its inception as a systematic academic endeavour, and particularly through Herbert Spencer's (1966) and Auguste Comte's (1975) observation that complexification and differentiation form driving dynamics of modern society, Sociology has concerned itself with issues of (functional) differentiation, as well as the corollary question of what holds a differentiated society together.

In this context, classical Sociology has been largely concerned with the impact of modernity on *national* societies and the consequential shift from stratificatory to functional differentiation within them.[7] These analyses presupposed segmentary differentiation at the global level in that the

[7] This section in part borrows from and expands the argument found in Buzan and Albert (2010).

separation of the world into politically and socially distinct and independent territorial units was taken as given. In this framing, society was something that existed *before* functional differentiation became dominant. The marker for society was the existence of shared beliefs and sentiments, Durkheim's *collective conscience*, that both gave social cohesion to a particular group of people and differentiated them from other cultures. This concept of society leaned strongly towards *Gemeinschaft* (community), understanding it as something evolved, historic and old. From that starting point, the problem was how the cohesion of such societies could survive the ever more pervasive impact of modernity as functional differentiation. What unites the classical works of Sociology, ranging from Herbert Spencer (1966) and Emile Durkheim (1933), through Georg Simmel (1908) and Max Weber (1968a), to Talcott Parsons (1967; 1999) and Niklas Luhmann (1997b), is that modernization and the evolution of society in general are seen in terms of a continuing specialization of tasks and the division of labour in society. The puzzle was whether the increasingly elaborate division of labour in modern societies would destroy the traditional (mechanical, identity) cohesion that defined what society was, or would itself serve as the basis for a new type of (organic) social whole that was defined by the interdependence of its division of labour.

The responses to this puzzle went in two directions: *decomposition* and *emergence*. Some saw functional differentiation as meaning a process of the *decomposition* of society in which the stability of a pre-existing cultural entity is compromised by an evolution that decomposes it into ever more specialized units, subsystems and roles. If society was viewed as community and shared culture (*Gemeinschaft*), then functional differentiation was corrosive. The importance of the organic, evolved identity in Sociology underpinned the concerns of those such as Tönnies (1887) and Gellner (1988: 61) who worried about the loss of *Gemeinschaft* in the transition to modernity and *Gesellschaft* (society as something instrumental, contractual and constructed). Crucial to this view is an account of what it is in the first place that makes society hang together as a whole despite ongoing processes of differentiation. This social glue is variously referred to as 'collective conscience' (Durkheim), a 'societal community' (Parsons) or a 'lifeworld' (Habermas), all of which point to the realm of shared values and norms. These cultural bonds act as the counterforce to the centrifugal tendencies of functional differentiation that were perhaps most graphically captured by Marx's idea of class war.

Others, most notably Weber and later Luhmann, saw functional differentiation as a process of *emergence* (see Schimank and Volkmann, 1999: 8ff.). In other words, it is the process of functional differentiation itself – the emergence of recognisably different spheres of politics, law,

economics, religion etc. – which accounts for the existence of modern society as a 'social whole' in the first place (see Nassehi, 2004). If society was viewed as *Gesellschaft*, then functional differentiation was integral to its existence, not antagonistic to it. Durkheim is in the middle, seeing decomposition as a necessary condition for emergence. Functional differentiation, then, does not mean that an integrated whole is somehow decomposed, but rather that, as society evolves into functional differentiation, it undergoes a process of newly emerging structures and systems. These systems build 'global accounts' of the world, that is, the functionally differentiated political system reconstructs the world in terms of power, the legal system reconstructs it in terms of legal/illegal, the scientific system in terms of true/false etc. Luhmann completes this turn by asserting that society (which for him cannot be anything but world society) can only appear as such because it is internally differentiated, in other words there is no 'integrating' force in addition to the form of functional differentiation itself.

While 'classical' sociological approaches almost invariably focus on *national* societies, the approaches to forms of society which are not nation-state societies, for instance theories of 'world' or 'global' society, vary greatly regarding the degree to which they draw on differentiation theory thought.

One extreme here is marked by Luhmann's theory of world society, which is based on differentiation theory through and through. Following Luhmann's claim that world society is primarily differentiated functionally (and notwithstanding that this allows for secondary forms of differentiation), it is only fairly recently that a number of studies have started to empirically assess (see, e.g., Stetter, 2008) the actual global range of Luhmann's theory, which was designed as a theory of world society, but arguably mostly had the Western world in mind (see Stichweh, 2000; also Stichweh, in this volume).

A notable example here would be the notion of a world characterized by (and differentiated into) various 'scapes', for example financescapes, technoscapes, mediascapes etc. Such scapes are understood as delocalized global spaces in which globalization takes place (see Appadurai, 1996) and quite aptly exemplify the situation in much of contemporary 'global' Sociology: it often thinks in terms of differentiation, yet barely lays open or reflects upon the theoretical and empirical bases for the *specific* kind of differentiation identified (and mostly avoids addressing the issue of what it is that is differentiated; see the arguments in Albert, 2007a; 2009 and Robertson, 2009). Another, more implicit, use of the concept of differentiation is marked by the neo-institutionalist world-polity approach which shuns notions of differentiation and focuses