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FROM THEORY TO ACTION: SOCIOLOGY'S IMPACT ON SOCIAL WORK

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Abstract
This article redefines some aspects of the relationship between practical social work and the scientific discipline of sociology based on Niklas Luhmann‘s sociological systems theory. After clarifying the social system context of social work, the article focuses on the distinction between self-description and outside description and asks whether social work needs a critical perspective.

I. Introduction

In Talcott Parsons‘ essay on the American higher education system, there is a small note on how sociology and social work first established themselves together at some universities and then later diverged (see Parsons, 1976, pp. 281-282). For example, unlike in Germany, social work training institutions in the United States were linked to universities early on and benefited from their research. However, today, when sociology professors want to explain their discipline to prospective students, it is often still explicitly distinguished from social work: Sociology is not the same as social work, but one can certainly work in social work with a sociology degree. And from my own experience, it can be said that in Germany, for example, it was not uncommon in the past for sociology and social work to be confused outside the universities when, for example, a student of sociology was asked whether he or she would learn the profession of a social worker. So there are connections between sociology and social work in a wide variety of contexts. In the following, this article will only marginally deal with what sociology has to offer social work. Thus, this is not primarily sociology *about* social work or an introduction to sociology *for* social work, but rather, from a systems theory observer perspective, an introductory determination of the relationship between sociology *and* social work.

Sociology is mostly not about the individual person, but rather about something like relationships between people, about actions and communications. And these relationships form the *social space, the social or the social systems*, studied by sociology. The social then can be the society, large functional areas, organizations, and interactions. And one of the essential research questions of sociology is then *how social order is possible in these areas*, how we all somehow understand each other even though we do not know most of the others, or how peace is the normal state of affairs in the world today despite increasing conflicts and demarcations between nation-states. For sociology, this is surprising and in need of explanation, which is why it asks about the structural conditions of

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this peaceful coexistence in relations of interaction up to and including those in the so-called world society. Basically, the entire range of topics in sociology is also the topic of practical social work. When sociology examines the conditions and consequences of human action and the communication structures in society and asks about the forms of social order in interaction relationships, organizations, and social sub-areas, social work starts acting with the problems of people which they have in these social areas. The function of social work is essentially that of social integration. And one of the prerequisites for fulfilling this task in practice in a measured way is an understanding of the social structures of interactions, organizations and social sub-areas, i.e., precisely the subject complex of the discipline of sociology.

Sociology emerged relatively late concerning other disciplines in the second half of the 19th century, at the transition from the society of Old Europe to the society of modernity. Put simply, the emergence of sociology responds to three major historical events and their social consequences, namely the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and industrialization in Europe. In the words of sociologist Friedrich Jonas, it then reads like this: In the course of the emergence of sociology, from the very beginning, „the idea had appeared that men live under laws which are the result of their own actions. (...) The human being who has liberated himself to himself, who understands himself as individuality and subject of his own actions, emancipates himself to a new order and lawfulness linked to his own interests and needs. The self-legality of society is self-legality precisely because it is not decreed by an extrasocietal subject, a god, or a king. For this very reason, it is also rationally transparent. It ties in with the needs and interests of people given in experience“ (Jonas, 1980, p. 283 – own translation). Society and people‘s lives in modernity are now less and less predictable; the buzzword now is contingency. People can free themselves more and more from state and church paternalism and shape their lives themselves but are also responsible for their lives‘ themselves imponderables.

Practical social work has a long history (Wendt, 2017), whereby the main origins of today‘s system can be traced back to the 19th century and thus roughly coincide with the beginning institutionalization of the discipline of sociology. „Social work owes its emergence to the profound shaking of bourgeois society by the upheavals caused by the Industrial Revolution and its social concomitants in the 19th century. The mass impoverishment that set in during the rise of capitalism, with its cyclical crises, transformed the problem of poverty: poverty no longer had primarily ‚natural causes‘ (bad harvests, wars, epidemics, etc.), but was ‚socially‘ caused, precisely by the economic and political conditions themselves. The problem of poverty was thus transformed into a ‚social question‘, and the traditional strategies of police and regulatory repression against the poor population appeared insufficient. In the liberal, enlightened bourgeoisie, the idea prevailed that one had to react to the problems arising with industrialization with new social integrationstrategies, which were to be based on individually oriented help and education.“ Both sociology as a discipline and social work as a profession were products and consequences of modernity, and in this context, Georg Simmel is also referred to by David Frisby (1985) as the first sociologist of modernity because he was the first to bring the experience of modernity, which was largely similar to Baudelaire‘s understanding, into the field of sociological research.

II.

In the following, social help and social work are distinguished in terms of system and profession. While *social help* refers to the function system, *social work* functions as a kind of catch-all term for the diverse professional groups operating in the context of the system. When speaking of *social work as a profession*, it should be noted that, although professional action is taken in this field of work, social work is not a *leading profession* that would dominate knowledge and action in the system of social help. Whether social work is a profession at all was raised very early on, with Abraham Flexner (1915), for example, stating that social workers do not possess any

independent competence and methods but only coordinate the help of other professions about their own cases. And also Talcott Parsons and Gerald M. Platt (1973, p. 248) later pointed out „the problematic character of their cognitive basis". That was one of the reasons for not granting it the status of a fully trained profession, but rather that of a semi-profession with a high proportion of paraprofessional staff (see, for example, Etzioni, 1969; Toren, 1977; Austin, 1978). Finally, for some years now, there have been voices that emphasize what is unique about social work: Andrew Abbott (1995, p. 549) problematizes social work as „the profession whose job was to mediate between all the others. (...) The social function of social work was intersystem translation". And while Rudolf Stichweh (1997a) fixes precisely here the problem of social work, which cannot offer independent functional expertise due to the care of diffuse problem situations, this can also be seen differently: Social work does not only observe one section of human life at a time, like the classical professions but must try to integrate all these observations. Social workers always come into play when the other professions are at a loss.

Social help is a function system of society that has only been differentiated in the wake of the functional differentiation of society to solve the problems created by this form of differentiation itself. Social help presupposes for its activity de facto exclusions or the future possibility of such from the other social functional areas and pursues the goal of transforming these into opportunities for inclusion. In this way, this system takes care of the inclusion problems of the population in society or in the function systems of society. This functional area differs from the others, such as economics, law, politics, etc., in that in order to fulfill the function of social help, replenishment from society must always be called in, with the risk of the system dissolving back into society if the problem is successfully dealt with (see Baecker, 1994, pp. 102-103). In this context, social help has been differentiated in modern society as the system that „distinguishes the actions and communications of this society according to whether they help or do not help" (Baecker, 1997, p. 51 – own translation). In contrast to educational processes, in which help functions as detour help for future problems, social help is mostly about current help. In this sense, one can also speak, with Niklas Luhmann (1975), of existence aftercare („Daseinsnachsorge") as the task of social help, whereby the deficits dragged along from the past are to be transformed into future opportunities.

As in the mono-professionally differentiated function systems, in social help, a change of persons as clients of the system is always intended. Basically, function systems can be differentiated according to the form of inclusion, i.e., how persons participate in social communication. Inclusion in modern society means that a specific form of inclusion is provided for all members of society in each function system. Such a form of inclusion can be performance or audience roles, e.g., politicians/voters in the political system or teachers/students in the educational system. It is true that in modern society, not everyone can participate in all function systems in the form of performance roles since we usually only have one occupation. However, everyone can be involved in all function systems in the form of audience roles, such as a voter, consumer, or patient.

However, how the audience is involved differs from system to system (Stichweh, 1988). Roughly, we can distinguish between function systems in which a) the participation of the audience takes the form of professional processing of problems of individual persons in interaction situations, as in the classical leading professions, and b) systems in which it does not seem to be first about the problem processing of individual persons in interaction situations, but rather, as in politics, economics and mass media, inclusion occurs as a quantitative mass phenomenon. These systems continue to run when, for example, many people vote for a specific party, buy certain products or receive the same information.

In the function system of *social help, both forms of inclusion* seem to exist. Here, the processing of people's problems can occur both individually and as a quantitative mass phenomenon. In this system, on the one hand, it

is about material compensation payments, about the administration of social assistance in the offices. The administration of social assistance here means that the office caseworkers apply the law, calculate claims and distribute the resource of social assistance according to standard specifications. In addition to this form of inclusion as a *quantitative mass phenomenon,* on the other hand, it is always about the *individual case of the needy person* who must be helped by professional intervention in interaction situations. Where and when to help or not to help is decided in the organizations in which social work is practiced as a profession. It is here that the services are provided for other function systems, which they count on.

The system operations of social help thus not only have the goal of communicative connectivity in the system and the possibility of inclusion of everyone in principle in these communications, but first and foremost, it is about enabling inclusion or re-inclusion in other social functional contexts. It is then a matter of preparing people for the different inclusion conditions of the individual social sub-areas. In contrast to the occupation, which can be described as an individual form of participation in socially produced goods (see Kurtz, 2009; 2013), social help functions as a social catch-all for social inequality in the modern era. Even the systems of family and religion do not have to participate in the downward spiral of exclusion (see Luhmann, 2000b, p. 243), but only the system of social help is quasi obliged to do something organizationally against this downward drift. For society, this system has the function of ensuring that the guiding principle of functional differentiation is not damaged, that virtually all people can participate in all social functions (Fuchs & Schneider, 1995, p. 210).

When we speak here of a function system of social help, we do not necessarily mean the world societal differentiated system, but we can also restrict this to individual national segments. Thus, for example, *segmentary subdifferentiations* can be found in all function systems: i.e., each function system has different segmentary forms depending on the nation-state. In Germany, for example, specific segments have emerged as large organizations of the subsystems of world society, each of which is interrelated with the others: German segments with their own modes of access to the globally communicatively differentiated function systems of economics, politics, science, art, and also social help. For this system dealing with exclusions, the restriction to a national segment is important, because probably only the inclusion side of the social sub-areas forms a worldwide context, while exclusions among themselves are owed instead to local special conditions that are not networked in world society (on this, see Stichweh, 1997b). And this may be related to segmentary sub-differentiations of the function systems, which vary according to region, but also to stratificational and individualized forms of differentiation.

III.

Particularly in the phase of its founding, sociology had to find its own form in order to re-describe the topics already dealt with by other disciplines, for which one can refer, for example, to Émile Durkheim‘s outside description of education and pedagogy (see Kurtz, 2007a, pp. 233-236). And to this day, sociology clearly differs from the other social sciences in the form of its observer perspective, in that it uses an external observer perspective to make outside descriptions of what the social sciences have already presented as self-descriptions of function systems. In the founding phase of sociology as an autonomous science, Georg Simmel probably most clearly summed up the sociological outside description. For him, most sociological investigations of the time „belong to one of the already otherwise existing sciences; for there is no content of life that is not already the object of one“ (Simmel, 1992, p. 311 – own translation). And sociology is for him „an eclectic science, in so far as the products of other sciences form its material. It deals with the results of historical research, anthropology, statistics, psychology as with semi-products; it does not turn directly to the primitive material that other sciences work on, but, as a science of second potency, so to speak, it creates new syntheses from what is already synthesis for those. In its present state, it gives only a new standpoint for the consideration of known facts.“

Along with Simmel, however, Durkheim also strove to find a role for the new discipline of sociology in the system of science, and in doing so also faced the problem that sociology, first of all, had no new topics, but only a new approach. And in order to establish a science, in Durkheim‘s sense, it first needs an independent method and then its own topics or a new approach to old topics. The method and the question of what sociology is, is summarized by Durkheim in *Les règles de la méthode sociologique*. He defines sociology as „the science of institutions, their origin and mode of action“ (Durkheim, 1950, p. XXII – own translation), whereby the term institution is understood so broadly that it includes all *social facts.* By a social fact, Durkheim understands „any more or less fixed mode of action which has the capacity of exerting an external constraint on the individual; or also which generally occurs in the sphere of a given society, possessing a life of its own independent of its individual manifestations“.

The method of sociology prescribed in the *rules* is already illustrated in *De la division du travail social* of 1893, a work that can probably be considered the first attempt at a differentiation theory of society. Here, contrary to what the title suggests, the focus is not only on the economic dimension as in the Scottish tradition or on the relationship between the division of labour and social inequality as in the German tradition. Instead, Durkheim is concerned with the social function of the division of labor, which functions as a structural principle in all aspects of society (see Durkheim, 1930). And this approach of approaching a familiar topic differently, i.e., sociologically, is then particularly evident in the study of suicide (Durkheim, 1969). For Durkheim‘s concern, there is not with the study of individual suicide, but with social analysis as distinct from psychology. The actual object of investigation in this study is the *social* suicide rate, with which it was nevertheless possible to demonstrate the social conditionality of individual behavior.

Even today, sociology occupies a particular position in research and education compared to the other social sciences in the disciplinary context of society. There are two essential tasks if one asks what other social sciences such as education, economics, or political science do. On the *one hand,* these disciplines work scientifically within the framework of their respective social functional areas, such as the educational system, the economic system, or the political system. There they find their primary topics, which they research, and whose findings they make available to the systems. And *secondly,* these disciplines also train the personnel of these systems, such as teachers, business economists, and political scientists. But this is precisely what sociology cannot do. It neither has a specific topic in the context of an own function system nor can it train the personnel for an own practice field, except, of course, sociologists for science. So sociology often works on issues that other disciplines are already working on – educational issues, for example. But it then does so with an outside view of the systems, so to speak, and might alert the other disciplines to blind spots in their analyses. And for practical purposes, sociology either trains students who, with their sociology degree, work as management consultants, elementary school teachers, or social pedagogues, or it functions as a minor subject in many courses of study, including social work.

However, one can define this distinction between sociology and other social sciences even more precisely using the distinction between self-description and outside description. Sociology can operate as a self-description of society, of the scientific system, and of itself as a scientific discipline, but in all other cases, it produces outside descriptions of its environment in a strictly distanced perspective separated by societal system boundaries. Sociology thus clearly differs in the form of its observer perspective from the disciplines of education, political science, law, economics, but also from the science of social work. These social sciences are reflection theories of function systems, whereby they, as theories of *the* system *within the* system, observe, describe and designate it in theory form. Reflection theories, with their reference to the self-control and orientation problems of function systems, are selfreferentially linked to their subject matter. By accepting the guiding distinction of their object of

knowledge, they at the same time also subordinate themselves to it and offer a description that is connectable in the communication of the system itself (see Luhmann & Schorr, 1988, p. 377). This does not mean, by the way, that these self-descriptions can do without reference to science. Reflection theories also communicate their research results in the form of scientific publications in academia, but at the same time, they are committed to their object in that they do not only conduct research about the system in a distanced way, but at the same time they are committed to it.

In contrast, sociology adopts an external observer perspective and produces outside descriptions of what the reflection theories of function systems have already presented as self-descriptions. In this respect, sociology describes a reality that has always already been described by other theories but without committing itself in advance to a positive reference of the system to be described. The knowledge problems of the social environment are primarily processed by sociology from the point of view of truth, whereby sociology as science observes, describes, and confronts the distinctions of its environment with its own guiding distinction. While, for example, education and the educational system are the primary objects of educational science, for the discipline of sociology, this is only one of the many fields of action occurring in society in which it can gain new insights and conduct comparative analyses. Educational science identifies with the institutions and goals of the educational system and, in terms of plausibility and motivation, must be on a continuum with the system (Kieserling, 2000b) so that what is being described can feel quite at home in the description. But this is precisely the approach to which sociology need not submit: It can approach the description of the educational system in a radically distanced observer perspective.

Moreover, what then follows from this for the discipline of social work? Although its research and training function is concentrated on one area of society – namely the *system of social help* – it is at the same time a discipline that is made up of several reference sciences: for example, sociology, philosophy, law, psychology, education, medicine, and economics. The *science of social work* works with these perspectives, i.e., it combines the knowledge and findings of these different disciplines with a view to particular problem situations that people may have in their social relationships. In contrast, *sociology* takes a particular perspective. Usually, as mentioned above, the social sciences study the events of a social sub-area and train the personnel for it. But sociology cannot do all this; it has neither a primary theme respectively its own functional area to be scientifically supervised, nor can it train the leading personnel for this area. Sociology rather takes a view of society as a whole. It seeks not only improvements in individual areas of society but also a balance between these areas in society as a whole. Sociology can be interpreted as a discipline that mediates between the functional areas of society and the scientific disciplines that supervise them. And this is precisely why it is essential for social work. Because the practical activity of social work is always also an interrelating of different disciplinary and societal perspectives. Thus, for example, the care of the long-term unemployed and its consequences also requires elucidation of, among other things, legal, medical, pedagogical, etc., possibilities. And the function of social integration then only results from the sum of these possibilities.

However, sociological knowledge does not yet enable the professional to have direct competence in action or decision-making that directly influences the practical system, but first of all a competence in reasoning that theoretical and empirical explanations can support. Sociology, for example, allows the social worker an additional orientation, a *self-observation* from an action-relieved perspective on her own work, whereby her own actions and decisions and organizational contexts can be questioned. In retrospective and prospective reflection, she can interpret her professional actions from an external perspective. And this opens up the possibility of routinizing and habitualizing their professional activity with their own decisions justified (among other things) by

sociological explanations. Seen like this, sociology as a minor subject has asupporting function for social work as an external scientific interpretation. For as Niklas Luhmann already indicated in his farewell lecture in Bielefeld, the success of sociology is not to be sought in its becoming practical, but in the form in which it can scientifically interpret practice outside the scientific system. Sociology appears in society only as a science; it has no other working basis at all (see Luhmann, 1993a, p.
252).

IV.

On the level of societal communication, sociology thus nevertheless does not adopt the perspective of a firstorder observer of the world (see Luhmann, 1991), who knows what is right for the system described – even if representatives of critical sociology pretend to do precisely this.[19] Sociology functions as a form of second-order observation, observing observations, revealing blind spots of what is being described, but at the same time not being immune to its own blindness. The distinction between self-description and outside description thus does not denote a hierarchy between disciplines: Nor does sociology possess the position of the ultimate observer in the audit society so described by Michael Power (1997), for sociology, too, finds its external observer who evaluates its success, and be it politics informed by the mass media, which does not always want to acknowledge the benefits of the discipline.

Although Luhmann himself has always demarcated himself against critical sociology, one can, of course, ask whether social work needs a critical perspective. Such a perspective could start with Rousseau‘s *Treatise on the origin and foundations of inequality among men* from 1755, or with the critical theory itself and continue it with the direction established in France (see, for example, Foucault, 1990; Eribon, 2016; Lagasnerie, 2017) or go straight to a critical systems theory. In the science of social work, at any rate, there have been considerations for some years to determine social work as a *justice profession*, whereby „the social mission of social work is seen in the production of social justice“ (Schrödter, 2007, p. 8 – own translation). To a certain extent, these considerations are already prepared in sociological systems theory, when Dirk Baecker (1994, pp. 103-104) extends Luhmann‘s considerations on justice as a contingency formula of the legal system (see Luhmann, 1993b, pp. 214-238) to justice as a contingency formula of the system of social help.

But to what extent must justice issues then be considered in social work? In her book on the *limits of justice*, the American philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum (2006), for example, criticizes those approaches to justice that are primarily concerned with contracts among equals because these approaches cannot adequately consider *questions of justice among unequals*. These justice issues address three unresolved problems in particular: the problems of justice toward people with physical and mental disabilities, those toward *all* people of the world, and those toward animals. In a nutshell, then, these are justice issues in the contexts of disability, nationality, and species. At first glance, the aspects of disability and nationality are relevant to social work practice because some social workers will deal with disabled people or people of other nationalities – such as refugees – in their professional practice. But why then should we extend the topic to the question of how to include animals in our concepts of social justice?

In the 1930s, the German philosopher Max Horkheimer illustrated society‘s structure using the example of the skyscraper, where he located the majority of animals in the lowest cellars, an animal hell created by humans. „Below the rooms in which the coolies of the earth perish by the millions, the indescribable, unthinkable suffering of the animals, the animal hell in human society would then be depicted, the sweat, the blood, the despair of the animals. (...) This house, whose cellar is a slaughterhouse and whose roof is a cathedral, indeed affords a beautiful view of the starry sky from the windows of the upper floors“ (Horkheimer, 1974, pp. 287-288 – own translation).

And if social work is now also concerned, among other things, with reintegrating the excluded socially, then one could perhaps turn one‘s gaze to those who often stand invisibly at the very bottom of the social hierarchy, and ask oneself whether this is really only a form of natural inequality or not also a social kind. Because ultimately, the same structures can often be seen in our dealings with animals as in our dealings with specific groups of people who, for some, somehow do not belong.

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