

2. Sociocybernetics: Foundations of Systems Theory

This chapter introduces the systems theory epistemological program as an analytical framework for a comprehensive consideration of the key aspects of the practices and maintenance of human differentiation, as discussed and reflected upon throughout this book. The integration of systems theoretical approaches, particularly those of the recent and next-generation complex systems theories, in combination with those of collective justificatory systems, offers a comprehensive insight into the dynamics of human differentiation practices as well as the mechanisms that reinforce and legitimize inequalities in social systems. These perspectives are frequently neglected in anthropological studies of human differentiation. In considering the present application, the specific focus is on systems theory as applied to social systems, an approach referred to as sociocybernetics. This field is a systemically conceived social and cultural science that deals with the dynamic processes of self-organization, control, and stabilization within social systems. A distinguishing feature of sociocybernetics is its emphasis on the interdependencies between individual actions, social structures, and cultural frames of meaning, a departure from the conventional focus in systems theory. This perspective is of particular significance within the analytical framework developed here, as it encompasses not only the maintenance of social order but also the emergent, frequently nonlinear dynamics that can shape and transform social systems. By centering on autopoietic processes and structural couplings, this theoretical framework enables a nuanced examination of the mechanisms that stabilize, transform, or legitimize human differentiation. In this work, the terms "system theory" and "sociocybernetics" are used synonymously, as sociocybernetics can be regarded as a further development of classical system theory. This conceptual equation maintains coherence and reflects an analytical perspective that emphasizes the stabilization of social orders and dynamic, emergent processes. By placing greater emphasis on the interdependencies among individual actions, social structures, and cultural frames of meaning, sociocybernetics enhances systems theory analysis, enabling the capture of complex social phenomena in a more differentiated manner. The strength of general systems theory lies in its transdisciplinary scope, which has developed in response to recognizable systemic challenges across diverse scientific fields. As a

holistic, heuristic, and epistemological tool, it transcends disciplinary boundaries, offering a comprehensive framework for analysis (Willke 1987, 3). In view of the increasing complexity of human societies and social systems driven by modernity and globalization, simple categorizations and deductive approaches reach their limits when it comes to grasping and interpreting practices of human differentiation in depth. The reality of social systems and the dynamics of human differentiation are simply too complex and too nuanced to be fully grasped by simple, deductive procedures based on general theories or categories. While the focus of social and cultural science analyses on subjective experiences and everyday lifeworlds provides a valuable starting point, its limitations become apparent when seeking deeper insights into the meta-levels of social systems and their interactions, particularly concerning mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. Against this backdrop, this transdisciplinary study aims to offer new perspectives on human practices of differentiation through a systemic-anthropological approach. Reductionist explanatory approaches that restrict differentiation processes and orders to simplified dimensions imply a linear and causal relationship between said processes, whereby any given process is dependent solely on the preceding one. This reductionism results in the culturalization of social phenomena, which in turn impedes more intricate analyses of the underlying structures and dynamics. The objective of the presented prism is to illustrate the intricate interconnectivity and mutual influence of social phenomena, thereby facilitating a comprehensive intersectional perspective. In the context of the present cognitive program on human differentiation and the role of social categories within diverse social systems, which is based on systems theory, it is essential to recognize that systems theory does not operate as a macro-theory and cannot be interpreted as a conventional social theory (Jahraus et al. 2012, 62). In other words, it provides an overarching heuristic and epistemological framework that enables an analysis of the complex and dynamic interactions between different levels of social systems, without reducing them to a single explanatory level. Systems theory, rather than adhering to traditional discussions about micro and macro levels, introduces a distinction between interaction, organizational, and societal systems. This differentiation is not about establishing a hierarchy among these system types, but rather about understanding how transitions occur between different levels within social systems. These transitions cannot merely be explained by a preference for micro or macro levels. Instead, they require a nuanced analysis of the dynamics that enable movement and influence across these different scopes of human interaction (Luhmann 1997b, 812). This study is grounded in a systems-theoretical approach to human differentiation, which serves as its epistemological and methodological foundation. This framework acknowledges the complexity and dynamics of social categories and identities, extending beyond the limitations of conventional macro-level theories. This approach is aware that social phenomena are not merely present at the macro level; rather, they are shaped in intricate ways by the interplay among various

social systems, including individual interactions, organizational structures, and the broader society. This perspective allows for an intersectional analysis, thereby providing profound insights into the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, as well as the construction of social identities. By emphasizing the interconnectivity of social phenomena, it allows for a comprehensive examination of the mutual influences between disparate levels and categories of society. This, in turn, yields a more precise understanding of human differentiation and offers a nuanced analysis of the underlying power structures and legitimation processes. The system-theoretical and differentiation-theoretical elements and findings employed in this work, which commonly entail normative implications in numerous system-theoretical approaches, are interpreted descriptively throughout. This study initially challenges the traditional separation between psychological, physical, and social systems as commonly delineated in systems theory. While this distinction may facilitate the analysis of various operational levels within systems theory, it proves overly restrictive for a comprehensive examination of human differentiation. Such a division is inadequate in that it fails to acknowledge the complex interactions and mutual influences that exist between these levels, particularly in terms of the formation of social identities and the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. In the study of human differentiation, where the interdependencies of thought, emotion, and physical existence are of pivotal importance, this rigid separation does not sufficiently capture the dynamic interplays. In view of these shortcomings, an integrative approach is put forth, which incorporates a refined adaptation of operational distinctions. This approach acknowledges the essential interconnections between mental, social, and bodily systems as a fundamental aspect of the formation of meaning and significance. By facilitating structural coupling, it enables a more detailed examination of the manner in which cognitive-affective-bodily schemata facilitate communication across systems through the encoding and decoding of information. In this context, structural coupling emerges as a crucial mechanism that facilitates the transfer and transformation of meanings and significance across different levels of human experience. This methodology allows for a more detailed and nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics involved in human differentiation and the pervasive interplay of systemic influences. An integrative approach inevitably gives rise to a number of aporias and challenges, which must be addressed in order to advance the field. From one perspective, this approach permits a comprehensive understanding of the intrinsic complexity and interdependence of human differentiation. Conversely, it necessitates meticulous navigation between the maintenance of the distinct autonomy of each system and the acknowledgment of their profoundly intertwined interactions. A strategic partial separation allows for the adaptive tailoring of theoretical perspectives to the specific characteristics of the subject matter. Nevertheless, this approach may also result in an incomplete representation of the nuances of communication processes between systems. The objective is to achieve a

balance that preserves a nuanced view of individual systems while simultaneously enabling a holistic integration of their interdependencies. The implementation of this integrative strategy demands substantial theoretical acuity and methodological rigor in order to effectively address the inherent complexities and challenges. This requires a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms of structural coupling and the codes that facilitate the transmission and transformation of meaning and significance across systemic boundaries. Moreover, it necessitates ongoing critical reflection on the strategic decisions regarding the partial adoption of operational distinctions. It is of the utmost importance to exercise due care and attention in this regard to assure the robustness and responsiveness of the approach to the dynamic interactions that occur within and between systems. This will ensure that the analysis of human differentiation processes is enhanced. Chapter 6, which focuses on affective-cognitive-bodily schemata, builds upon empirically grounded research in social cognition and advocates for an integrative perspective that analyzes the interplay between mental processes, bodily states, and social dynamics. This paradigm enables a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms that drive human differentiation by encompassing the full spectrum of influences, from psychological and physical to societal. It illustrates the necessity of a comprehensive analysis that not only examines the social constructions of identity and belonging but also considers the psychological and bodily processes that underpin and shape these social categories. It is of the utmost importance to recognize these interdependencies in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the power structures and legitimation processes that form the foundation of social systems and their differentiation practices. In this context, the principles of systems theory provide a robust framework for knowledge that extends beyond the contributions of individual scholars. This framework integrates the collective insights and logics of systems theory, thereby harnessing the synergistic potential of its various approaches. By embracing this comprehensive approach, the chapter seeks to synthesize a plethora of perspectives, thus enriching the comprehension of the inherent complexities within social systems and processes. This methodology transcends the limitations of a single theoretical perspective, striving to present a dynamic and nuanced portrayal of human differentiation. This depiction seeks to encapsulate the intricate and interwoven dimensions of social reality, offering a multifaceted analysis that encompasses the multifarious factors that shape human differentiation. The application of the system-theoretical cognitive program to the study of human differentiation is intended to enhance theoretical understanding by incorporating both individual and structural perspectives. The systemic-anthropological approach is concerned with elucidating the relational and dynamic relationships that exist within social systems. It examines the manner in which systemic structures and individual actions interact to produce and maintain social stratifications and identities. This approach offers insights into the mechanisms that facilitate or impede social integration and

equality, as well as the adaptive responses of social systems to changes and challenges. Although the terms “relational” and “dynamic” are frequently encountered in academic discourse, the far-reaching implications for research methodology and practice are seldom fully acknowledged. The approach taken here, complemented by systems justification theory, puts forth the necessity of incorporating non-linearity and the multiplicity of feedback loops—both positive and negative—into the analytical framework. It should be noted that no claim is made to completeness, and the limitations and challenges of the systems theory approach are openly addressed. In order to provide a balanced understanding of the applicability and limitations of the systems theory approach, the limitations and points of criticism of the analytical method used are not excluded.

2.1 Challenges

In the field of human differentiation, a modern sociocybernetic approach requires the acknowledgment of the autonomy and independence of social systems. These systems are distinguished by intricate differentiations that are culturally and socially constructed, and they function in accordance with their own distinctive logic and dynamics. Consequently, any interventions aimed at addressing social inequalities or enhancing inclusion must be designed with a comprehensive understanding of these internal dynamics. The proposed approach emphasizes the significance of acknowledging and prioritizing the complex and mutually reinforcing relationships between diverse identity categories and their associated social contexts. It is imperative to underscore that any intervention or endeavor aimed at social transformation with regard to differentiation must be meticulously attuned to the internal structures and meaning systems of the affected social groups. This ensures that efforts are contextualized in a manner that is appropriate to the circumstances and effectively resonate with the targeted communities.

The *first challenge* inherent to a comprehensive approach, dedicated to the topic of human differentiation—a central theme in all social science disciplines—is to proceed in a *synchronous, cooperative, and co-evolutionary manner*. This necessitates an acknowledgment of the autonomy and intrinsic logic of social systems, as opposed to an attempt through direct external control to exert influence upon them. The traditional methods of centralized planning and direct control of social processes, as exemplified by the socialist approach, are incompatible with the intrinsic characteristics of social systems, such as complexity and self-referentiality. Such attempts to inadmissibly simplify complex social systems—that is, to *trivialize* them or to steer them directly from above or from outside—have not only lost credibility in socio-political terms but have also demonstrated that repressive practices cannot guarantee

long-term successful control over systems (Willke 2014b, 193). This perspective suggests that effective strategies for mitigating inequality and discrimination cannot be externally imposed; rather, they must emerge from within the systems they aim to transform. This approach fosters organic growth and development by allowing for the evolution of effective strategies from a system's inherent dynamics. This notion is repeatedly referenced throughout the discussion, particularly in the context of cultural coding, its associated regimes, and the ways in which this work's approach differs from conventional intersectional frameworks. A significant challenge for the systemic-anthropological approach is to navigate the complex and sometimes contradictory roles that cultural codes play in the formation of identities and affiliations within social systems. This dilemma is addressed through an examination of two coexisting regimes of differentiation: the primordial and the neoliberal. These are outlined in Chapters 8 and 9. Neoliberal codings are shaped by market dynamics and individual achievements, whereas primordial codings are based on attributes that are perceived as unchangeable.

The *second challenge* of this approach arises from the necessity to address the fundamental paradox inherent in the liberal-democratic model. Considering the limitations of top-down control measures, it is imperative to examine the viability of alternative political frameworks within Western societies. The recognition that social systems are inherently nonlinear and defined by intricate relational dynamics challenges the conventional wisdom that top-down control can effectively address complex social issues. This realization implies the necessity of investigating alternative political frameworks that are more compatible with the intricacies of social systems while remaining consistent with the democratic paradigm. While this critical examination throughout the book points toward such explorations, a detailed investigation into alternative political frameworks is beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, the analysis indicates the value of considering frameworks that respect the autonomy of social systems while addressing existing social challenges, striking a balance between system independence and the necessity for meaningful social change.

The *third challenge*, which arises from the dominance of neoliberal doctrines, is further complicated by the post-democratic threats to freedom through manipulation and subtle systemic constraints that are neoliberal in nature. In contrast to more overt forms of coercion and physical violence that have traditionally posed a threat to freedom, post-democratic threats are manifested through more insidious forms of influence that often evade detection and remain hidden. This neoliberal influence creates a context in which the complexity and opacity of social categorization and differentiation practices are not only intensified but also strategically employed to obscure the mechanisms of human differentiation. As a result, the seemingly invis-

ible and indirect methods of neoliberal systemic constraints erode traditional categories of inclusion and exclusion, thereby diminishing the capacity of individuals and groups to effectively resist discrimination and inequality. These subtle manipulation techniques present significant challenges to understanding and addressing social injustices, as they are inherently compromising to societal perceptions of freedom and autonomy. It is therefore imperative to adopt a critical and reflective approach to the systemic and structural conditions that give rise to these issues. The challenge of conceptualizing “freedom” in Western societies is intricately linked to discourses on regimes of differentiation and cultural codings. By examining the interconnections between cultural codes and social structures through a systemic anthropological lens, we can gain a more sophisticated comprehension of the intricacies surrounding the concept of freedom in the contemporary era. This comprehensive examination elucidates the manner in which social systems both construct and constrain the liberties and opportunities available to disparate groups, thereby offering indispensable insights for confronting the challenges posed by neoliberal influences on freedom and social justice.

The *fourth challenge* comprises the complex task of examining the intricate interplay between social, economic, political, and cultural forces. The objective here is to identify the intersectional mechanisms of differentiation and discrimination that shape the formation of social identities, influence patterns of affiliation, and regulate processes of inclusion and exclusion. To gain a deeper understanding of this complex issue, research must move beyond examining individual experiences and rigorously examine the influence of emotions, discourses, and power structures on the unequal distribution of power and resources. A profound comprehension of these dynamics is essential for the development of more equitable and inclusive social systems. Moreover, a systemic anthropological approach necessitates a nuanced comprehension of the inherent tensions and contradictions that have emerged from the various functional differentiations since 1945. This relational conceptualization of functional differentiation asserts that society is not merely a conglomerate of its differentiated parts. Instead, it is more accurate to posit that society is best conceptualized as a network of interdependent elements that are interconnected in a non-linear and non-binary fashion. This complexity gives rise to a multifaceted experience of belonging or exclusion, shaped by the intricate interplay of social, economic, political, and cultural forces that inform the formation of identities and the construction of lifeworlds. The concept of community is often presumed to be universally applicable; however, it can be challenging to apply this assumption consistently, given the significant analytical challenge of accounting for the distinct differences between individuals and groups. It is imperative to perceive society not only in terms of its social representation but also in terms of its factual reality. While the social dimension may project an image of a unified, homogeneous community, the factual

dimension reveals a diversity and disparity that challenge this perception. This disjunction between the conceptual understanding of society and its actual structure and dynamics points to the tension between the semantic portrayal of social phenomena and their real, often intricate, and contradictory manifestations. A critical distinction emerges, akin to that between the visible layer of social norms and values and the concealed, structural mechanisms that shape the social fabric.

2.2 Introduction to Key Terms and Concepts

This chapter delves into the evolution of systems theory since Niklas Luhmann, enriched by subsequent theorists' contributions, and integrates other pertinent theories critical for analyzing human differentiation. Central to this synthesis is Helmut Willke's control theory approach, complemented by John T. Jost's theory of system justification. The latter, grounded in extensive empirical research, has been refined through numerous studies and meta-analyses into a coherent framework. This synthesis not only functions as a heuristic and epistemological tool for examining human differentiation but also sets the stage for addressing the issues and core topics that are further explored in subsequent chapters.

2.2.1 Functional Differentiation

This section examines the concept of functional differentiation, a fundamental tenet of systems theory, and its application to the study of human differentiation. Particular attention is paid to the interplay of social, material, and temporal dimensions and their distinct functions within society. The acknowledgment of these dimensions permits the discernment of the multiplicity of social roles and functions, as well as the delineation of the challenges and strains that individuals confront in an increasingly intricate and differentiated global landscape. Moreover, a critical examination of functional differentiation discloses its problematic aspects, including the oversimplification of social evolution and the dichotomous framing of "traditional" versus "modern" elements. The concept of functional differentiation delineates the segmentation of contemporary societies into autonomous subsystems, including the economy, politics, education, and law. Each of these subsystems serves a distinct purpose and is governed by its own logic and regulations. This segregation contributes to the overall complexity of societal structures. From an evolutionary perspective, functional differentiation has supplanted earlier forms of social organization, including segmentary (based on familial or tribal affiliations) and stratificatory (based on hierarchical class structures) differentiations (Nassehi 2012, 65).

Segmentary differentiation represents the most fundamental form of social organization, often observed in archaic societies. In this structure, a social system is divided into comparable segments, such as families, tribes, or villages. The actions undertaken within these segments are fundamentally aligned with the collective needs and commonalities of the group (ibid.). As societies evolve and become more complex, the segmentary differentiation model is superseded by a *stratificatory differentiation* model. This is due to the fact that societal roles are not uniform, as not all members are able to address the same challenges simultaneously. This transition is precipitated by the necessity to manage the increasing societal complexity that cannot be adequately addressed under conditions of equality (ibid., 66). Consequently, the emergence of subsystems that are inherently unequal is a phenomenon that arises from the stratificatory differentiation model. This approach is predicated on the notion that social inequality acts as a pragmatic mechanism for the distribution of responsibilities and the management of complexity within a paradigm of ostensible social equality. This shift in focus entails a transition from an egalitarian framework to one where inequality is institutionalized through the creation of varied social roles, rights, and duties across different subsystems. In contrast, *functional differentiation*¹ introduces a more intricate and specialized level of complexity through the establishment of a diverse and interdependent array of autonomous subsystems, including the economy, politics, and education. Each subsystem is designed to address specific aspects of societal needs, thereby enhancing the efficiency of information processing and problem-solving. However, this complexity requires continuous efforts to coordinate and integrate these diverse functions to maintain social cohesion and ensure systemic stability. This form of differentiation reflects a sophisticated evolution from simpler societal structures, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between independence and interdependence within present-day societies. In order to integrate the tenets of systems theory with those of functional differentiation, *three key dimensions* must be considered: the social, factual, and temporal dimensions. It is thus imperative to examine the ways in which societies construct and negotiate meanings along a spectrum of axes. These dimensions constitute organizational frameworks that facilitate the elucidation and interpretation of the world, emphasizing certain perspectives while excluding others, much like analytical lenses (Nassehi 2021, 27).

The *social dimension* pertains to the nature of social relationships and interactions within social systems. This dimension is concerned with the participants in communication processes, examining the nature of social relationships and interactions

1 The term “functional differentiation” is employed to delineate both the concept itself and the third form of differentiation within the social structure.

within social systems. This dimension encompasses all facets of communication, interpersonal relationships, power structures, and social norms and values. It examines the individuals or groups engaged in interactions or relationships.

The *factual dimension* addresses the content-related or thematic aspects of communications and interactions within a system. This dimension focuses on the specific content or themes that emerge from communication and interaction within a system. It examines the biological, cultural, or economic characteristics that are pertinent to the classification and comprehension of differences. It examines the discourses and bodies of knowledge that shape notions of identity and difference, analyzing the processes by which knowledge about “otherness” is produced, disseminated and institutionalized, and its role in maintaining processes of differentiation.

The *temporal dimension* encompasses the study of time and its effects on social phenomena. This dimension allows for the differentiation between past and future, thereby providing insights into the manner in which historical contexts and developments shape present and future social processes. This approach underscores the significance of grasping the historical evolution of societal constructs and how these legacies shape present and future dynamics.

By integrating these dimensions, sociologists and theorists can gain a more comprehensive view of present-day society, recognizing how these interrelated aspects interact to form complex social orders and structures. The process of human differentiation, when considered within the context of the social, factual, and temporal dimensions, illuminates the formation and categorization of individual and collective identities within the complex structures of contemporary societies. In functionally differentiated societies, individuals are categorized not only on the basis of their social relationships and roles (social dimension) but also according to their roles in knowledge and activity sectors (factual dimension), as well as the temporal aspects of their existence and actions (temporal dimension). The differentiation between the social and factual dimensions permits a more profound comprehension of the processes involved in societal classification and their impact on the interactions between individuals and groups. The social dimension is concerned with the relationships among individuals and the nature of their interactions. In contrast, the factual dimension is concerned with the content of these interactions, examining the specific topics being discussed or acted upon. The temporal dimension introduces the historical and future contexts, examining the role of past experiences and future anticipations in current activities. In terms of human differentiation, this implies that individuals are distinguished not only by their social roles and relationships but also by their involvement in various function-specific systems, such as the economy, education, or legal frameworks. Each of these systems is governed by its

distinct codes and logic, which contribute to the differentiation of individuals within contemporary societies. Such participation and the identities it fosters are not static but rather dynamic and evolving over time, due to changes in personal development and societal shifts. In consequence, functional differentiation within society gives rise to a multitude of identities and affiliations that transcend the confines of conventional social categorizations, such as class or profession. This contributes to the intricate tapestry of complex social life. Nassehi addresses the fundamental challenge of managing the internal complexity that arises from the diversity of content differences and the varied needs of society's members (ibid., 28). The optimal social structure would be one in which all individuals are afforded equal rights, obligations, and access to resources. In practice, the existence of differing abilities, interests, and social backgrounds gives rise to a situation in which the needs and contributions of individuals within society vary considerably. The direct management of these substantive differences within a framework of social equality is an inherently complex task, which can often prove overwhelming for social systems. By situating the issue of complexity within the social dimension, whereby different social positions and subsystems engender inequality, society can more effectively distribute and manage complexity. Each subsystem and social position performs specific functions, contributing in unique ways to the overall system. Such differentiation allows society to address its internal challenges and the needs of its members in a more flexible and efficient manner. Consequently, the various positions entail disparate tasks, roles, functions, and, notably, distinct statuses. This stratification, while serving a functional purpose, introduces a new set of challenges related to the question of fairness and the equitable distribution of resources and opportunities (Nassehi 2021, 29).

In contemporary Western societies, amidst a myriad of specific challenges, there has been a shift in focus from questioning *who* will solve problems to considering *how* these problems can be solved. This transition enables the circumvention of structural constraints that previously impeded the participation of certain groups in problem-solving processes in stratified societies. Society is divided into distinct functional systems, each addressing a specific domain of problem-solving. Each of these systems functions in accordance with its own code of conduct, which determines its distinctive approach to problem-solving. For example, the scientific system operates on a binary logic of true or false, the economic system on a binary logic of profit or loss, and the political system on a binary logic of power or powerlessness. The ability to differentiate between functional systems thus permits the examination of challenges from a multiplicity of viewpoints, thereby necessitating a diverse, subsystem-specific approach to societal issues. As a result, contemporary societies in Western contexts are distinguished by a distinctive form of differentiation that eschews a singular, central organizing principle. In contrast to a centralized representation of social unity that unifies all, various subsystem-

specific perspectives exist that are both indispensable and replaceable in terms of their functional contributions. This structure fosters a more dynamic and responsive societal framework, capable of adapting to the evolving complexities of today's life. On the one hand, *each functional system is indispensable* due to its specialization and unique capacity for addressing specific issues. This implies that no other system can replicate the functions or problem-solving capabilities of another without compromising efficiency and effectiveness. To illustrate, the legal system is the sole entity capable of resolving legal disputes, while the economic system is the only one able to manage economic transactions in an effective manner. On the other hand, *while the functions of these systems are indispensable, their structures and methods are substitutable*, meaning they can evolve over time to meet new challenges or adapt to shifting societal conditions. The education system may, for instance, introduce new pedagogical approaches, the healthcare system may adopt novel treatment protocols, and the political system may implement new participatory mechanisms. The dual nature of adaptability and evolutionary potential in social systems within a dynamic and ever-changing environment ensures that broader society remains functional amidst fluctuating internal and external conditions. The evolutionary flexibility of social subsystems, as evidenced by modifications to their structures and functions, directly influences the categorization and integration of individuals and groups within these systems. This dynamic adaptation of systems provides the foundation for a differentiated classification of people, underscoring the necessity to consider the functional requirements and distinctive criteria of subsystems in the process of human differentiation. In the context of human differentiation, the classification and evaluation of individuals and groups by various subsystems exhibit considerable variation. While certain social, economic, and cultural categories may be essential for inclusion within one system, they may be deemed irrelevant or even exclusionary in another. This context-dependent and variable assessment of individuals and groups demonstrates that social categorizations and identities are neither static nor universal. Instead, they are fluid and shaped by, as well as adaptable to, the functional imperatives of the respective subsystems. The adaptability and capacity for renewal inherent in Western societies confer resilience and dynamism, particularly noticeable within their specialized subsystems. This characteristic significantly influences the processes of human differentiation, thereby drawing attention to the interaction between system-specific roles and the broader social fabric. Gaining a deeper understanding of human differentiation through this lens is crucial, as the complexity of current societal structures often results in overwhelming demands on individuals. These demands arise not only from the necessity of navigating multiple subsystems but also from the requirement to continually adapt to changing roles and expectations within these frameworks (Bauman 2008, 2003).

The accelerated expansion of information, roles, and expectations in our globally interconnected society places significant demands on individuals, frequently exceeding their capacity to process and adapt. In light of these circumstances, it is imperative to develop a theoretical framework that can elucidate the multifaceted aspects of human differentiation and delineate the processes through which individuals and groups establish their sense of orientation and construct their identities within these intricate structures. The intricacy of present-day society can be daunting for both individuals and groups as they strive to comprehend and navigate their multifaceted social roles and identities within a functionally differentiated system. Identities across various social categories operate as semantic anchor points, providing orientation amidst the complexities of today's world. These identities, or rather the *spectrum of possibilities for identification*, foster a sense of belonging and collective identity across a broad range of social dimensions. In a functionally differentiated society, the multifaceted nature of human differentiation is evident not only in the array of social roles and functions but also in the rich tapestry of identification opportunities rooted in ethnic, cultural, religious, gender, and national dimensions. These *diverse identities also serve an integrative function*, providing a sense of belonging that transcends mere functional distinctions and imbues both individual and collective identities with meaning. However, this mode of integration presents several challenges. Such an approach may result in oversimplifications that obscure the true complexity of social reality, leading to the marginalization or exclusion of individuals who do not conform to dominant identity categories.

As functional differentiation encourages specialization and autonomy across societal domains, each system develops its own distinct logic and standards of rationality, which contribute to societal fragmentation. This fragmentation intensifies social complexity, thereby necessitating from individuals a considerable degree of flexibility and adaptability to effectively navigate and act across diverse contexts. In this context, the formation of ethnic and national identities can be seen as a means of establishing a coherent and accessible structure amidst the multitude of social experiences and structures. These identities function as mechanisms that cultivate a sense of community and belonging, despite the profound functional differentiation and the accompanying uncertainties and complexities. Such a process can result in the perpetuation of exclusion and inequality, as well as the obfuscation of the structural challenges and injustices inherent in a functionally differentiated society. From this perspective, an examination of human differentiation requires a nuanced understanding of the complex nuances of social structures and the multifaceted roles that ethnic, cultural, national, religious, gender, and other identities play as both integrative and simplifying mechanisms. It is crucial to reassess the equilibrium between acknowledging diversity and promoting social integration. Consequently, it is of paramount importance to develop methodologies that respect both individual and collective identities while addressing structural challenges,

with the overarching objective of establishing a more equitable and inclusive social order. This nuanced approach requires not only an acknowledgement of the multifaceted nature of identities but also an active engagement with the underlying issues that affect social cohesion and equity.

The traditional dichotomy between “modern differentiated” and “traditional” societies, as suggested by functional differentiation, is subjected to critical reevaluation in this analysis. The advent of global connectivity and the resulting cultural intermixing across multiple modernities and value systems have precipitated a reorganization of social structures within Western contexts, rendering the simplistic binary of “modern” versus “traditional” increasingly obsolete. This evolution requires a critical reassessment of the conventional dichotomy that is still often presumed in scholarly discourse. A comprehensive analysis of the interrelationship between neoliberal and primordial coding logics reveals that attributes previously regarded as “pre-modern” continue to persist and exert influence within ostensibly progressive societies. This interplay illustrates the continued relevance of the regimes of orders of difference. The objective of this analysis is to acknowledge and delineate both the enduring presence of traditional codings in contemporary contexts and the co-existence of diverse coding logics in the contemporary globalized framework. The concept of functional differentiation is explored in depth globally, with particular attention devoted to its manifestations in neoliberal and primordial coded practices of subjectivation and conditioning. The central metacode of inclusion/exclusion, pivotal for understanding social structures, intersects with traditional codes and acts to constrain freedom within exclusion zones by confining communication to personal networks (Luhmann 2002a, 684). This dynamic impedes the effective operation of functionally differentiated subsystems. Moreover, the metacode inclusion/exclusion process acquires a spatial dimension. This is due to the fact that functional systems are able to operate effectively in certain global regions but are constrained in others as a result of the predominance of personal networks. A distinction can be made between “normal” regions, which are typified by fully differentiated systems, and those which are characterized by the inclusion/exclusion metacode. The role of personal networks, particularly in the Global South, is subjected to close examination in order to ascertain their significant influence on regional functionality (*ibid.*, 459). The functional differentiation inherent to the system-theoretical approach is designed for universal applicability. This has come about as a result of the rejection of moral and religious worldviews and through adaptation to the conditions of high complexity in world society (Gonçalves 2016, 62). This transition towards functional systems inaugurates a new era of objectivity, secularity, complexity, and alignment with prevailing societal demands. Communication across various societal sectors must adapt to this complexity by aligning with the functions of the subsystems, thus fostering a social structure universally based on the principle of functional differentiation. Nevertheless, the assertion of universality does

not negate the existence of regional discrepancies in the configuration of social systems. The pervasive implementation of functional differentiation, in conjunction with the tenet of universal equality, is obscured by a neoliberal agenda that has a profound impact on innumerable individuals through the use of potent codifications. This agenda engenders an imaginary distortion in Western societies (*ibid.*, 65), promoting the belief that self-referential functional systems can function independently of unequal conditions. This perspective idealizes the image of liberal democracies while failing to acknowledge their inherent shortcomings. This illusion persists, particularly in Western contexts, which are geopolitically privileged. However, empirical evidence from intersectionality research indicates that informal mechanisms, such as personalism and social origin, exert a considerable influence on social mobility and status (Jackson et al. 2022; Collins 2000; Lareau 2011; Rivera 2015). The neoliberal codings intensify the mechanisms of exclusion that are embedded within social processes, while simultaneously obscuring the actual inequalities and power structures that this work's systemic-anthropological perspective seeks to address. The dissemination of functional differentiation throughout global society coincides with the implementation of a neoliberal agenda that may be described as "regime-like," as discussed in Chapter 9. A comprehensive examination of this topic will be presented in subsequent sections of this book.

2.2.2 Social Systems

Social systems provide a crucial framework for understanding human differentiation, as well as for navigating and exerting power and domination, and for constructing and reconstructing identities and social orders. These systems are of great importance in understanding the intricacies and nuances of social interactions and the power relations that shape these processes. Social systems are defined as dynamic networks of interactions and communication patterns that are organized around common functions and goals. They possess the inherent capabilities of self-organization and self-regulation, which are known as autopoiesis. The autopoietic characteristic enables social systems to effectively manage complexity and adapt to their environments.

Social Systems and Autopoiesis The autopoietic nature of social systems—which is characterized by their ability for self-organization, reproduction, and regulation—is manifested through their self-referentiality and operational closure. The concept of autopoiesis offers an explanation of how systems are capable of autonomously producing and sustaining themselves through continuous internal interactions and transformations. This self-sustaining mechanism is of great consequence for the adaptability and longevity of social systems, as it enables them to respond dynamically to internal and external changes while maintaining their

structural integrity (Maturana and Varela 1980; F.J. Varela et al. 2017). This concept represents a fundamental premise for the comprehension of social systems, which are distinguished by their self-referential and autopoietic nature. These systems are in a state of constant development and self-sustainability, driven by a process of self-reference. Social systems operate based on their own unique structures and codes, employing the distinction between self-reference and external reference to effectively manage complexity. This distinction allows them to maintain and regulate their interactions with the environment. By focusing on their intrinsic dynamics and operational procedures, social systems are able to adapt to external alterations while maintaining their fundamental functions and identity. The ability to distinguish between and respond to internal and external influences is a crucial aspect of their resilience and ongoing adaptation (Luhmann 1996, 61). The concept of autopoiesis, which characterizes a self-sustaining process, provides the central framework of the systemic-anthropological approach to human differentiation presented here. By applying systems theory to social phenomena, one can gain insight into the mechanisms through which social systems actively engage in their own design and evolution. This engagement occurs through the continuous generation and communication of meaning, employing specific codes.

Social Systems, Complexity Reduction and Semantic Codes In social systems, the continuous production and processing of meaning act as fundamental guides for social behavior, assisting in the management of environmental complexity. The establishment of order within these systems is achieved through a complex array of communicative actions that not only sculpt internal structures but also facilitate the system's adaptive alignment with external conditions. Communication functions as the primary medium for the creation and transmission of meaning in social systems. The exchange of symbols, language, and cultural codes enables individuals to construct and disseminate meanings, which in turn exert an influence on collective realities and social orders. This process of continual creation and reformation of order demonstrates the dynamic nature of social systems, which exist and evolve as a result of the interplay between social, psychological, and material dimensions. This analysis presents a novel reconceptualization of the traditional systems-theoretical distinction between psychological, physical, and social systems, with the aim of fostering a more holistic understanding of social systems. In this approach, social systems are not defined solely by their structural or functional characteristics. Instead, they are conceptualized as dynamic entities, shaped by the intricate interconnections between individual psychological processes, physical conditions, and social interactions. This integrative approach permits a nuanced appreciation of the complex nature of social orders, which are marked by emergent phenomena and non-linear progressions. The non-linearity and emergence observed in social systems indicate that meaning not only reflects but also drives the emergence of new structures and

patterns. This exemplifies the transformative power of integrated social dynamics. The dynamic interactions among individuals, shaped by meaning, catalyze emergent orders and phenomena that significantly influence the evolution of systems. Even minor alterations can precipitate extensive and unforeseeable impacts on the system as a whole. An appreciation of the interconnectedness across system levels enhances our comprehension of social process complexity and emphasizes the formation of social realities through a continuous, reciprocal dialogue between individual experiences, physical states, and social structures. Systems emerge as a result of differentiation from their environmental context, which may also contain other systems. A system is defined by a network of interdependent relationships among its elements, which together configure the system's structure. In accordance with the principle of autopoiesis, the reduction of complexity is identified as a fundamental function of social systems. These systems facilitate the management of the vast complexity of the world by establishing a connection between this expansive complexity and the limited human capacity for conscious information processing. This process entails establishing order within chaos and delineating boundaries that simultaneously define and maintain the system's integrity. By focusing on these interactions and their effects, we can gain insight into the adaptive mechanisms that allow social systems to not only sustain themselves but also evolve (Luhmann 1991, 116). As previously stated, human capabilities are largely immutable due to inherent limitations (Schroer 2017, 279). Systems manage complexity by establishing internal and external domains, thereby differentiating between the system's interior and its external environment. The differentiation thus allows for the creation of areas with reduced complexity (Luhmann 1991, 116). The environment from which a system emerges has a profound and fundamental impact on its continued sustenance. Social systems, as self-referential and autopoietic entities, originate and persist through a constant self-reference. This self-referential nature enables them to manage complexity and orient themselves within an exceedingly intricate environment. Systems establish their identity by delineating themselves from their surrounding environment and functioning in accordance with their distinctive structures and codes. This process of self-reference is inextricably linked to the generation of meaning, as systems continuously create meanings to maintain their identity and ensure their continuity. The capacity to generate meaning provides social systems with the necessary orientation in a dynamic and ever-changing environment. The interplay between self-reference and external reference establishes a distinctive connection, enabling social systems to sustain specific environmental relations defined by their primary distinctions and operational modes (Willke 1987, 69). Social systems interact with their environments through a distinctive process of self-organization and regulation. This process is governed by the fundamental distinctions and operational modes of the systems in question, which may be understood as their internal mechanisms and rules. The distinction between self-reference and external reference enables social

systems to generate the information necessary for their autopoiesis (Luhmann 1996, 607). Semantic structures are indispensable for the successful completion of this process. It follows that social subsystems are dependent on the application of specialized semantics, which facilitate the implementation of system-specific communicative operations (Willke 1987, 66).

Semantic codes are of crucial importance in the rapid and precise classification and interpretation of communications, as they serve to encode and decode meanings. These mechanisms are indispensable for the proper functioning of social systems, as they facilitate the reduction of complexity and the effective management of communication. Coding is of paramount importance for the establishment and maintenance of semantic order within social systems, forming the foundation for mutual understanding and coordinated action. The evolution of specialized semantics in social systems, including the emergence of jargon, symbols, memes, and specific concepts, is driven by the need to meet unique communication and information requirements. These semantics facilitate comprehension of complex subjects within the system, thereby enhancing its organizational and regulatory capacities. They enable rapid, clear communication and decision-making. They are indispensable for maintaining operational cohesion and system autonomy, providing an internal framework for understanding that is distinct from the external environment. This thesis employs the concept of *structural coupling* (see Chapter 2.2.7) to examine the transmission of meaning facilitated by codes. This study examines how social systems actively configure their structure and dynamics through the use of communicative codes embedded in cultural codings. This examination offers a more profound understanding of the self-referential nature of social systems by emphasizing the pivotal role of cultural codes in shaping and maintaining systemic organization and identity. By means of differentiation practices, social systems establish a distinction between themselves and their environment, thereby defining a unique identity. These practices facilitate effective complexity management by enabling systems to distinguish relevant from irrelevant information, thereby influencing system responses to environmental changes. The environment of a social system is comprised of not only other social systems but also physical and symbolic elements. The interactions between a social system and its environment are characterized by mutual influences. The environment provides the context for the system's internal processes, while the system's actions can potentially alter its environment. Moreover, social systems exert a proactive influence on their surrounding context, particularly in the context of human differentiation. This is achieved by the creation, maintenance, and reshaping of social norms, values, and practices, which subsequently define the boundaries and possibilities for individual and collective actions. The concept of social systems engaging actively with their environments will be further developed and emphasized throughout the remainder of this book. Social systems are conceptualized as both closed and open, which represents

an apparent paradox that is a fundamental aspect of autopoietic systems' function (Luhmann 1997a, 68). The concept of operational closedness pertains to the internal logic and self-sustainability of a system. These attributes are maintained through recursive processes that operate independently of external influences. This indicates that a system's fundamental mechanisms are generated and sustained by the interconnectedness of its own operations. Concurrently, social systems exhibit a form of openness (ibid., 69), which stems from their interaction with the environment. Despite the fact that autopoietic systems are governed internally and their operations are not directly influenced from the outside, they are nevertheless receptive to information and stimuli from their surroundings. This enables them to respond adaptively. This openness pertains to the system's environmental sensitivity, or its capacity to detect changes and adjust its structures accordingly. This interaction with the environment strengthens operational closure, thereby enhancing the system's overall complexity and adaptability. The conjunction of operational closure and environmental openness enables social systems to sustain dynamic stability, continuously reproducing their internal order while adroitly negotiating the challenges and opportunities presented by their environmental interactions. This equilibrium between closure and openness is of great consequence for the evolution and persistence of social systems (Endreß 2023, 202).

2.2.3 Self-Referentiality

Self-reference describes a system's ability to use its own elements, operations, or communications as the foundation for subsequent operations. This internal dynamic enables the system to function based on its own structure. As operationally closed, self-referential systems, they operate solely on the basis of their own structures and operations. By means of self-reference, these systems generate and modify their constituent elements and structures, thereby creating a cyclical process of self-maintenance and adaptation. This operational closure does not isolate the system from its environment; rather, it forms the foundation for its autonomy, enabling the system to evolve and adapt while preserving its fundamental identity and functionality (Aretz 2022, 190). Self-reference encompasses a level of autonomy where information and processes are internally generated, processed, and adapted, centering primarily on the system itself rather than external influences. Characterized by internal feedback loops, a self-referential system uses its own states or structures as the foundation for further developments and operations. This principle of self-referentiality defines the ability of social systems to refer to themselves, thereby managing, controlling, and adapting based on this inward focus. Consequently, such systems are shaped not so much by external factors but rather by the manner in which they internally manage processes based on their own structures and historical context. This autonomy is pivotal for maintaining systemic

integrity and adaptability, allowing systems to evolve through self-driven modifications (Luhmann 2002b, 118). Self-referential systems exhibit an inherent capacity for evolution and adaptation through a continuous process of self-organization, modifying their structures and operations over time to respond to both internal and external changes. This evolutionary capability is of critical importance for the maintenance and enhancement of the system's viability in a dynamic environment. The theoretical underpinnings of this adaptive capacity can be found in second-order cybernetics, which posits that systems are dynamic entities characterized by feedback loops and internal self-observation processes that enable ongoing adaptation and transformation. The adaptability of self-referential systems is therefore conceptualized not merely as a response to external stimuli, but rather as a proactive process driven by the system's internal structure and historical context. This framework elucidates the impact of a system's internal states and past experiences on its reactions and evolutionary trajectory.

Additionally, the concept of emergence is central to understanding self-referential systems, referring to the rise of new properties and behaviors that cannot be directly predicted from the system's individual components. Emergent phenomena result from complex interactions within the system, organized and modulated by self-referential processes. These properties are intrinsic to the overall system and cannot be reduced to the actions of its parts alone; they are a result of the system as a whole. In scientific discourse, the concept of emergence is frequently investigated in domains such as consciousness research, social networks, and ecological systems. These fields illustrate how the interactions of simpler entities can yield complex and unforeseen patterns. This is indicative of the pivotal function of internal interactions and relationships, which are coordinated through self-referential mechanisms, in fostering non-linear and unpredictable developmental trajectories. Emergent properties, therefore, represent both a challenge to comprehension and a wellspring for new possibilities and innovations within self-referential systems.

The concept of *self-reflexivity* represents a sophisticated form of self-referentiality, which is a defining feature of *second-order systems*. These systems are distinguished by their capacity for self-observation and reflection, which sets them apart from other forms of self-referential systems. In contrast to basic self-referential systems, which utilize their operations and structures exclusively for the purpose of reproduction, second-order systems possess the capacity to observe, evaluate, and critically reflect upon these processes (Müller and Müller, 555). This elevated degree of reflexivity enables such systems to adopt a meta-perspective, thereby enhancing their capacity to subject their functioning to rigorous scrutiny, critically examine the processes and structures that constitute them, and recognize the conditions that define their existence. This attribute is of particular importance in social systems, as it provides a foundation for complex phenomena such as learning, adaptation, and innovation. Self-reflective systems are capable of contextualizing their actions and

decisions within a broader framework, thereby influencing their developmental trajectories and survival strategies. In the domain of second-order cybernetics—a field that delves into the observation of observations—this self-reflexivity is subject to particularly close scrutiny. This approach incorporates the observer into the analysis, acknowledging that each observation is contingent upon the observing system's structure and operational dynamics. Second-order cybernetics employs a critical examination of the introspective capabilities of systems, including those of a scientific and social nature. This enables a profound comprehension of both the systems themselves and their environments (Maldonado and Concha 2022). The distinction between first-order and second-order systems is fundamentally contingent upon the presence and extent of reflexivity and self-awareness. First-order systems are distinguished by self-referential processes that facilitate their reproduction. In contrast, second-order systems are distinguished by their enhanced capability to observe, interrogate, and act based on these reflective insights.

2.2.4 System Justification and the Role of Communication in Upholding Normative Orders

In accordance with the tenets of system justification theory, individuals frequently engage in unconscious efforts to perceive existing social structures as legitimate and justified. Individuals typically demonstrate a proclivity to endorse and rationalize the prevailing social, economic, and political structures. This proclivity to reinforce the status quo exhibits considerable individual variation and is susceptible to alteration contingent on circumstances and personal proclivities (Jost 2020, 62). In essence, it is about reducing cognitive dissonance and reinforcing a sense of predictability and security. The theory of system justification will be examined in greater detail in Chapter 4.6. This section will introduce the fundamental concepts and demonstrate their relevance within the context of the system-theoretical approach to communication and the intersectional concept of articulation. This step situates system justification theory within a broader context, which is essential for a more profound comprehension of the book. The systematic, step-by-step approach to system justification theory, and its subsequent detailed elaboration, are designed to facilitate comprehension of the underlying complex concepts. The repeated references to system justification theory serve to emphasize its crucial role in the core theme of the study, thereby reinforcing thematic coherence and underscoring the continued relevance of the theory to the topics under discussion. Moreover, the necessity for existential security must be investigated from a multitude of disciplinary perspectives. This includes an examination of terror management theory and the concept of death awareness (see Chapter 4).

In the context of systems theory, the motivation to justify a system should initially be understood as a fundamental anthropological mechanism that promotes

stability and homeostasis within a social system. The act of justifying existing social arrangements maintains the status quo. From the perspective of systems theory, this can be interpreted as a form of negative feedback². This negative feedback functions to counteract changes or disruptions in the system, thereby promoting systemic stability. The integration of system justification theory, understood as a deep psychological need for security, enhances the systems theory approach to communication. In systems theory, communication is regarded as the fundamental process through which social systems establish and maintain their structures and boundaries. This enables systems to organize and perpetuate themselves by constructing and processing meaning. A renewed focus on the role of communication within social systems enables a more profound examination of the way social realities are constituted. Social systems undergo continuous transformation through recurrent communication processes that not only delineate their own structure but also shape prevailing norms and values. Communication, therefore, depicts not only superficial interactions but also embodies fundamental processes that contribute significantly to the legitimization of the system. It is notable that the impulse to justify systems extends beyond individual phenomena and is significantly promoted and reinforced by social communication within social systems. This suggests that the inclination to justify the system is not merely a product of individual or group preferences; rather, it is sustained and legitimized by the communicative content that circulates within the system. Communication can be defined as the synthesis of three elements: information, which conveys externally referential content; utterance, representing the self-referentiality of communication; and understanding, which observes the distinction between communication and information, determining the mode of connection between self-reference and external reference (P. Fuchs 2012, 91). When the concept of system justification is integrated into this framework, it becomes evident that communication processes within social systems serve not only operate as a means of exchanging information or coordinating actions, but also as a mechanism for legitimizing existing social, economic, and political arrangements. The acceptance of the status quo, as postulated by system justification theory, is reinforced by communicative actions that reproduce specific ideologies, stereotypes, and norms. Such communicative actions contribute to the construction of a social reality in which inequalities and power structures appear to be natural, justified, or unavoidable.

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- 2 In contradistinction to *negative feedback*, which is aimed at stabilizing the system and restoring it to a state of equilibrium, *positive feedback* promotes the intensification of changes that may result in the system's departure from its original state. In this context, it is noteworthy that the terms "negative" and "positive" do not imply any normative judgments in sociocybernetics; rather, they describe functional processes within a system.

A significant challenge in the discourse on system justification is the frequently indistinct delineation between the concepts of “groups” and “social systems.” There is a diversity of opinion regarding the distinction between groups and systems, as well as the manner in which they interact with regard to the justification of social structures. Some perspectives consider groups to be subsystems within a broader social system, whereas others view groups and systems as distinct entities with unique dynamics and functions. In this study, the term “social system” is defined as an overarching structure that encompasses groups, collectives, and cultures without being confined to them. While social systems manifest universal properties in their organization and functioning, they are invariably shaped by specific linguistic, cultural, and hegemonic contexts. This dual perspective asserts that social systems function as both general frameworks and contextually grounded phenomena. Within the scope of this work, this methodological approach is applied to the German-speaking Central European region, enabling an analysis of social systems as they operate within their historical, social, and geopolitical contexts. This broader perspective clarifies the role of communicative processes throughout the system, facilitating a more profound awareness of the manner in which system-justifying beliefs are disseminated and reinforced through social communication, transcending mere group identities. This, in turn, contributes to the stabilization and legitimization of the entire system. This perspective renders evident the intimate interconnection between systems theory and system justification theory, particularly with respect to the role of communication. Communication functions as a crucial mechanism through which social systems not only define and maintain their existence and structures but also continuously renegotiate and reaffirm the legitimacy and normative order of these systems.

While discursive and media forms of communication within social systems primarily stabilize existing social orders and satisfy psychological needs for system justification, the intersectional concept of articulation (see Chapter 9.1) offers a more expansive perspective on dynamic communication processes in these systems. The term “articulation,” as used here, refers to the communicative process through which a multitude of social forces—including economic interests, political ideologies, cultural norms, and social identities—are not only interwoven but also actively negotiated. This approach enhances our comprehension of the intricate interactions and resulting intersections between disparate social categories. The ongoing articulation of individual subject positions within social systems generates semantic boundaries, defined by the logic of difference, and mediated by cultural codes. These boundaries contribute both to the stabilization and questioning of normative orders. As detailed in Chapter 8, cultural codes enable the transfer of meanings through the formation of structural couplings, which are inherently provisional and subject to continual modification. These structures reflect the ongoing

dynamics of meaning differentiation and exemplify the continual reshaping of identification possibilities. The ongoing reassessment of cultural codes presents a persistent challenge to the normative foundations of social systems, while simultaneously facilitating their reorganization. In social systems, this process pertains to the dynamic adaptation and interpretation of cultural norms, values, beliefs, and symbolism that are fundamental to social coexistence. Cultural codes, which are deeply embedded and frequently implicit, regulate social interactions, inform interpretations of events, and influence the formation of identity. These codes are not static; rather, they are dynamic and evolve in response to shifts in social, political, economic, and technological contexts. Cultural codes are reinterpreted through discourse, media, art, education, and legal decisions, thereby introducing new perspectives and opportunities into societal perceptions. This ongoing reinterpretation is essential for societal adaptation to changing circumstances, integration of innovations, and conflict resolution. It plays a pivotal role in the evolution and transformation of social structures by continuously redefining the grounds of coexistence. The aforementioned principles exemplify the malleable and self-referential nature of social systems. The collective justification structures, which may be defined as networks of shared norms, values, and beliefs, are not only shaped by communication but are also subject to continuous renegotiation and reinforcement. The concept of non-linearity is of central importance in this context, as social processes and phenomena are observed to follow complex and unpredictable patterns. This suggests that the endorsement or rejection of social systems by individuals cannot be determined based on individual factors or identity characteristics alone. Rather, the interplay between disparate social, economic, and political forces can result in unanticipated outcomes and dynamics. Moreover, the phenomenon of intersectionality affects how individuals perceive and justify social systems. The concept of intersectionality illustrates that an individual's justification of a social system is not contingent on their position within a single social category. In addition, it is also influenced by the complex interplay of these categories.

2.2.5 Social Complexity

The concept of social complexity, particularly relevant in the context of human differentiation, is especially pertinent when considering the multi-layered nature of globalized and differentiated social formations (for further details, please refer to section 2.2.1). Societies that have embraced globalization exhibit a complex interdependence and networking, both locally and globally, which amplifies the complexity within their social, economic, and political frameworks. Social complexity is distinguished by several key attributes, including interdependence, dynamism, emergence, self-organization, adaptability, diversity, and differentiation (Donnelly 2023, 14; Carmichael 2019; Mitchell 2009; La Porte 2015). The combination of these

features provides an illustrative overview of the interconnectedness and resultant intricacies within the decision-making arenas of social systems. This heightened complexity reflects not only the multitude of interacting layers but also the broad spectrum of potential outcomes that can influence system behaviors and societal trajectories (Willke 1987, 23). This type of complexity is primarily characterized by the dynamic relationship between a system and its environment. This relationship should not be viewed as a static state; rather, it should be considered a continuous relational process. The dynamic interplay permits the system to undergo constant adaptation and response to environmental changes, thereby elucidating the fluid nature of system-environment interactions. This line of thinking calls for a shift in focus from the mere existence of systems within a fixed framework to a more active engagement with and modification of the contextual landscapes that shape them (Luhmann 1970, 115). In this context, attention is directed not merely to the extensive range of prospective structural associations, but also to the conscious selectivity evident in the establishment of these links. The crucial aspect is the way a system discerningly elects specific links from the multitude of potential options and eschews others. This selective process is of great consequence for the creation and maintenance of functional orders within the system. This process guarantees that the system can organize and streamline its operations in an efficient manner by focusing on connections that enhance its functionality and coherence, while discarding those that do not contribute to its intended goals (Luhmann 1996, 47). The practice of selective networking allows social systems to establish simplified orders within their inherently complex structures. This unity of complexity is expressed through relationships of mutual facilitation (Kappeler et al. 2019). Elements and subsystems within a social system both enable and constrain each other's functions and development, thereby fostering an adaptive and dynamic balance. These interactions are non-linear, often yielding unpredictable patterns and outcomes that subsequently shape the system's evolution. The emergence of new patterns and structures from these interactions provides further evidence of the critical aspect of social complexity. The emergence of new phenomena cannot be attributed to the intrinsic properties of individual elements; rather, they arise from interactions that generate novel properties and functionalities. Such emergent properties enhance the system's adaptability and resilience by providing innovative solutions to emerging challenges. In an exceedingly complex world, *meaning* serves as a selective and orienting mechanism, distilling the vast array of potential experiences and actions into a manageable subset. As previously discussed, social systems are constituted in such a way as to manage and mitigate complexity. They help create a link between the intrinsic complexity of the world and the restricted capacity of humans to process information in a conscious manner. This capacity is largely determined by human biology. This management is achieved through the establishment of systems that distinctly demarcate their internal environments from external influences. The differentiation

between the internal and external realms of a system allows for the creation of zones with reduced complexity, thereby facilitating more effective system management and adaptation (Luhmann 1970, 123). The evolution of social systems is driven by the constraints of human cognitive abilities, which are increasingly challenged by the complexities of contemporary societies. This has led to the emergence of specialized roles and functions within social systems, as discussed in the context of functional differentiation. By compartmentalizing tasks and responsibilities, social systems facilitate the management and distribution of modern complexities, enabling individuals to focus on specific areas of expertise (Schroer 2017, 278). As social complexity increases in response to continual growth in group size, there is a corresponding need for advanced internal differentiation. This process of diversification acts as a vital mechanism for addressing and resolving the challenges posed by rising complexity. The cultivation of a variety of subsystems and roles within a social system allows for the productive harnessing of complexity, rather than mere management of it. This stratification enables systems to respond adaptively to changes and to incorporate the diverse needs and viewpoints of their members effectively. Consequently, social systems evolve in a dynamic manner, thereby enhancing their capacity for self-organization and adaptation to fluctuating environmental conditions. Therefore, it can be argued that the continual internal differentiation of social systems is indispensable for the maintenance of their functionality and stability in the context of the complexities of social interactions. In contrast to other systems and complexity theory approaches, the principle of individual *agency* is not negated or trivialized in the present approach; rather, it is integrated into the dynamic interplay between individuals and societies. The concept of individual agency plays a pivotal role in the phenomenon of emergence, which pertains to the emergence of social phenomena and behaviors that are not entirely predictable. Although human mechanisms of feeling, thinking, and acting influence social systems, the rigid “either/or” dichotomy, as espoused by strict methodological individualism on the one hand (human existence is determined entirely by individual will and agency) and rigid structuralism on the other (social structures dominate life), is rejected. Instead, a dynamic interplay is recognized in which neither individuals nor structures alone determine social realities. Rather, both are seen to stand in complex interaction with each other. The remainder of this study will examine various forms of agency, including evolutionary-anthropological behaviors that manifest as automated, schematic processes (also known as system-1 processes) (Kahneman 2013; Kannengiesser and Gero 2019; Faghihi et al. 2015), agency also manifests in reflexive, open-ended, and unpredictable processes, which are processed in the cerebrum (system-2 processes; see, in particular, chapters 3 and 6). Agency is a broad concept that encompasses a multitude of possibilities, which are always embedded in the matrix of social complexity. This complexity is composed of several key components, including interdependency, non-linear dynamics, emergence, self-organiza-

tion, adaptivity, diversity, and differentiation. These elements are discussed in further detail in the following sections. Although there is considerable diversity in the approaches taken to the complexity of social systems, the present study will primarily focus on the core elements of those complexity theories that operate in a multi-level system. The actors, or “agents” (Carmichael 2019, 8), exhibit a degree of autonomy and interdependence, typically acting in accordance with established norms (Miller and Page 2007, 101). However, they are also subject to individual and unpredictable behavior (Schneider 2014, 135). These actors may be individuals, companies, or cohesive groups that differ in their status and power, particularly in terms of access to essential resources. Another pivotal element pertinent to our discourse and previously alluded to in the aforementioned *challenges* (see Chapter 2.1) is the empirical discovery of the absence of centralized control in complex systems that directs the actions of individual components (Carmichael 2019, 12; Day 2024, 18). In this generative perspective, it is the adaptations of the actors that give rise to emergent patterns through iterative and reciprocal adaptation processes. These actors act in a *decentralized* manner, whereby their behavior is responsive to changes within the system and to the actions of other actors and thus undergoes adaptation. The concept of “fitness” is of central importance in this context, as the actors are constantly striving to optimize their results in the course of interactions with their environment (Holland 1996, 49; Kauffman 1993). The capacity to adapt within network-like and decentralized structures is a fundamental aspect that unites all approaches within the field of complexity theory, despite their significant differences. Stable collective structures never emerge from centralized authority; rather, they emerge from the network-like units themselves. This represents a bottom-up explanation of social phenomena (Mitchell 2009; Schneider 2014, 136; Miller and Page 2007, 147). The outcomes of these coevolutionary processes, driven by the actions of the actors to enhance their individual fitness, manifest as transient and unstable equilibrium states that generate system behavior with limited predictability. This property is frequently referred to in the literature as an emergent phenomenon. The concept of emergence, which is frequently discussed in this work, posits that the activities of a system are more and different than the sum of the individual actions at the lower (local) level (Day 2024, 18). In contrast to linear systems, in which the sum of their parts is the sum, contemporary social systems, which are at the center of our analysis of human differentiation, are never linear or predictable. In this context, it can be stated that the whole is never the sum of its parts and thus is not a result of a simple cause-and-effect relationship (Theise 2023, 9). A variety of phenomena are associated with the behavior of complex systems, including chaotic change, emergence, bifurcations (see Chapter 8.3.2), and self-organized criticality. The organization of complex social systems is based on feedback loops (Day 2024, 19), which in this book are conceptualized as cultural codes. However, there is still no generally accepted nomenclature for the effects observed in adaptive systems.

2.2.6 Double contingency

The concept of double contingency is of great consequence when attempting to comprehend the ways in which humans differentiate themselves within societies that are themselves functionally differentiated. The concept of contingency indicates that events, states, or decisions could have occurred otherwise, and thus that they are neither necessary nor inevitable (Luhmann 1996, 184).

The term “simple contingency” is used in the context of systems theory and social science to describe the potential for variation in the actions or states of systems or individuals. It indicates that these occurrences are not predetermined and may vary in different circumstances. In the context of human differentiation, this implies that distinctions such as gender or social class are not intrinsic or immutable; rather, they are shaped by social conventions, norms, and values. These distinctions are contingent, shaped by decisions that could have been otherwise, indicating that traditional methods of categorizing and sorting individuals are not the sole possibilities. There are always alternative ways of conceptualizing and acting upon the notions of identity and belonging. This emphasis on the contingency of human differentiations reiterates the role of social constructions in the formation of identities and social categories. While certain prevailing tendencies, which will be explored in greater detail later in this book, persist, the shift from a society predominantly interpreted through religious frameworks to one that views social developments as a conscious choice among alternatives represents a profound transformation. This shift signifies the evolving nature of social interpretations and the choices they entail, thereby marking a significant evolution in the understanding of social dynamics (Willke 1987, 29). As a concomitant of this paradigm shift, there is an intensifying emphasis on the justification of decisions, which simultaneously elevates the probability of conflict. Consequently, the management of an increase in contingency is only feasible when effective mechanisms for regulating conflicts have been established. This context elucidates the relationship between complexity and contingency. The term “complexity” is used to describe the decision-making environment in which a system must respond to external demands. This multitude of potential outcomes presents a significant challenge for the system. In contrast, contingency pertains to the alternative actions available to the system, thereby distinguishing it from the problems that arise from the variety of potential actions (*ibid.*, 32). This distinction is of paramount importance, as it reveals that while complexity provides the framework for decision-making, contingency delineates the potential pathways a system can pursue. In this context, the capacity to select and modify courses of action in managing system dynamics and potential conflicts represents a fundamental anchor point.

The term “double contingency” is used to describe a situation in which the actions of two or more actors (either individuals or social systems) within an inter-

action are based on mutual expectations and reactions. This introduces a level of inherent unpredictability, as the actions of each actor are influenced by the expectations and reactions of the other actors involved. In the context of human differentiation, this concept suggests that both self-perception and the perception of others, as well as the categorization of individuals, are continuously shaped through a process of mutual observation and adaptation. The integration of social and factual dimensions illuminates the manner in which social categories and identities are not only constituted in response to the nature of interactions (social dimension) but also in relation to the subjects under discussion (factual dimension). The mutual expectations and inherent unpredictability of others' behaviors within the social dimension necessitate the structuring and negotiation of identities and differences. The uncertainty inherent in double contingency renders each participant a "black box" to the others, thereby creating a compulsion to define and negotiate role expectations and social categories in order to render interactions predictable and comprehensible (Luhmann 1997a, 337). The social dimension places emphasis on the mutual expectations and the unpredictable behavior of other actors. In contrast, the factual dimension introduces a further layer of complexity by focusing on the content and topics that are central to these interactions. The processes of producing, disseminating, and institutionalizing knowledge about differences and identities play a significant role in the discursive construction and establishment of human differentiation. Therefore, the negotiation of identities occurs not only within the social context but is also inextricably linked to the material dimension, encompassing norms, economic conditions, and educational stipulations. Moreover, the principle of non-linearity is crucial in understanding that the interactions among individual actions, social expectations, and factual conditions are fundamentally unpredictable. This principle is pivotal in illustrating that changes in social structuring do not straightforwardly stem from individual actions or decisions. Rather, they emerge from a complex interplay of various factors. The concept of non-linearity underscores the inherent dynamism and fluidity of social categorization processes. Consequently, relying on a simplistic cause-and-effect logic, confined to a limited set of dimensions, is inherently inadequate for comprehensively capturing the nuances of human differentiation. Instead, a more profound and nuanced examination of the diverse and often unexpected trajectories that identities and social categories may follow over time is necessary. An intersectional and multi-methodological approach is essential for examining discrimination, and a willingness to embrace serendipity is crucial. The concept of serendipity—the discovery of unexpected findings in the search for something else—is linked to that of non-linearity and double contingency through their shared elements of unpredictability and openness to new possibilities. The notion of non-linearity signifies that developments and interactions are neither straightforward nor predictable, while double contingency accentuates the mutual indeterminacy in social interactions. The concept of serendipity enhances

these ideas by focusing on the potential for innovative insights and solutions that emerge from the unexpected convergences and divergences within these dynamic processes. Within the theoretical framework of intersectionality, the concept of non-linearity signifies the impossibility of reducing the outcomes resulting from the interaction between diverse identifiers, identities, and categories to a mere summation or prediction. An individual's life experience cannot be reduced to a mere addition of their identity attributes. Rather, it is shaped by the intricate, dynamic, and often unanticipated interactions between these characteristics. To illustrate, the experiences of a Black woman cannot be reduced to a mere sum of the experiences of women and Black individuals. It is thus imperative to examine the specific conditions that emerge from the intersection of racism and sexism and their intertwined impacts. The concept of double contingency helps further accentuate the inherent complexity and non-linearity of the formation of social categories. This insight is indicative of the necessity of considering both social and factual dimensions in the analysis of human differentiation. This is required in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the layered, intersectional experiences of individuals. Identities and differences emerge and evolve through a continuous process of social interaction and factual confrontation, shaped by the mutual influences of social expectations and substantive matters. The concept of double contingency sheds light on the intrinsic unpredictability and variability of social categories and identities within a complex, functionally differentiated social context. This concept highlights the crucial function of double contingency in navigating diversity.

2.2.7 Structural Coupling

The concept of structural coupling pertains to the way systems undergo adaptations and evolutionary processes at the internal structural level. These changes are driven by the conveyance of information through the medium of coded meanings. These coded meanings constitute interfaces that facilitate the exchange of relevant information between different systems, thereby enabling them to retain their distinctive modes of operation and autonomy. The process of "coding" involves the transformation of information within and between systems, with the objective of ensuring comprehensibility and connectivity. This process encompasses both the encoding of experiences and states into forms that can be communicated and the decoding of these forms in accordance with the internal logic of the receiving system. These processes form the foundation for structural coupling, which enables systems with disparate logics to exchange information and contribute to mutual development. In this integrative approach, structural coupling is regarded as a means of mediating intricate interactions among cognitive, affective, and bodily processes and their relationships to other systems. The exchange of information and influence across different levels is facilitated by coded meanings, which in turn enhance the self-orga-

nizing and self-referential dynamics of systems. This model proposes that emotional states, physical sensations, and thoughts are interconnected through specific codes, thereby enabling the effective communication of these elements—and, ultimately, meanings—across system boundaries. Empirical research frequently corroborates the assertion that specific emotional states and thoughts are coded to facilitate communication across system boundaries. A notable illustration can be found in studies on mirror neurons, which demonstrate how the observation of others' actions is encoded and processed in one's own brain, thereby providing a neural basis for empathy and social understanding. Interdisciplinary research provides further insight into the ways in which physical processes and social interactions intersect. The study of emotional contagion and the influence of body language in social contexts provides profound insights into the reciprocal influence of physical and emotional states on social interactions. For example, research has demonstrated that stress reactions can be transmitted from one individual to another, while positive emotions such as joy or fear can also influence social interactions. As will be thoroughly examined in Chapter 6, the notion of structural coupling is strongly corroborated by the latest research on social cognition. It is essential to recognize that conceptualizing structural coupling as a means of transmitting meanings between systems is firmly anchored in the tenets of embodied, embedded, extended, and enactive cognition. These theories provide a compelling and plausible framework for understanding how cognitive processes are situated within the physical body and deeply integrated with the environmental and social contexts in which they occur (Schlicht 2023; Newen, Bruin, and Gallagher 2018; Gallagher 2023). When these perspectives are considered collectively, it becomes evident that cognitive processes extend beyond the boundaries of the individual, operating as integrated phenomena within complex social and material contexts. Instead, they are profoundly rooted in the biological, social, and material contexts that individuals navigate. The influence of embodied experiences, which are grounded in the biological and physical mechanisms of the body, extends beyond the cognitive and affective processes of individuals. These experiences also play a significant role in shaping interactions with the environment and other systems. This interplay between the body's experiences and their impact on cognitive functions and social interactions demonstrates the inextricable connection between an individual's physical state and their cognitive and social dynamics (Shapiro 2019; Setti and Borghi 2018; Guillaume et al. 2016; Guy and Dove 2016). These experiences are conveyed through specific codes that serve as conduits between disparate system levels, thereby facilitating the integration of heterogeneous cognitive processes. Moreover, individuals and their cognitive processes are deeply embedded within their social and physical environments, which play a pivotal role in shaping their cognitive schemas. This embeddedness evinces the importance of contemplating the dynamic interplay between individuals and their environments, which is enabled by structural coupling. Moreover, the concept of ex-

tended cognition enhances our comprehension of cognitive processes by underscoring that external artifacts and environmental structures are not mere adjuncts but are integral components of the cognitive system. Integrating these perspectives at the level of substance demonstrates how structural couplings extend beyond internal processes to include external resources, which are actively incorporated into the generation of meaning (Telakivi 2023). The enactive perspective ultimately maintains that cognitive structures are in a state of continual flux, arising and developing in response to active engagement with the surrounding environment. This perspective postulates that cognition is a process that is continuously shaped by the dynamic interplay between the individual and their environment. Consequently, the construction of understanding and knowledge is not constrained by the boundaries of the mind; rather, it is developed through continuous, reciprocal interactions with the social and physical world (Sepúlveda-Pedro 2023).

The involvement in social and physical activities is of paramount importance for the advancement and transformation of multidimensional schemata. This places significant emphasis on the function of agency in the generation of meanings within the context of structural coupling. This concept is consistent with Bateson's sophisticated epistemological principle that information and meaning do not originate from static entities. In contrast, they arise through active perception and the differentiation of differences (Bateson 1999). In accordance with this framework, a system generates information by identifying significant distinctions (see Chapter 6.4). This perspective encapsulates the essence of structural coupling, which enables mutual adaptation and influence among systems through the intricate exchange of encoded meanings. Bateson's insights show that meanings are not intrinsic to events; rather, they are produced through the systems' abilities to discern relevant differences. This mechanism is of critical importance to the functioning of autopoietic systems, which maintain their organization and structure through the continuous self-regeneration of their components and the ability to perceive and respond adeptly to environmental stimuli. This dynamic process exhibits the proactive engagement of the system with its environment, driven by its inherent capacity to discern pertinent distinctions that shape its evolutionary trajectory. The concept of structural coupling can be understood as a mechanism through which systems can engage in the exchange and co-production of meanings (Baraldi, Corsi, and Esposito 1997, 187). This is achieved through the application of the principle of differentiation of differences (Rieger 2003, 328; Luhmann 1997a, 114). Affective-cognitive-bodily schemata and cultural coding play a pivotal role in this dynamic process, enabling systems to interact and adapt to one another. This interaction is contingent upon the recognition and interpretation of differences, which enables systems to extract and process information from their environment in accordance with their own distinctive logic. The transfer of meanings between systems

is mediated through coded messages, such as symbols, language, and gestures, which are generated by one system and interpreted by another based on its specific schemata and cultural coding. Affective-cognitive-bodily schemata function as internal frameworks that shape how information is perceived, emotionally assessed, and physically experienced, thereby guiding the generation, processing, and interpretation of meanings. These schemata are closely associated with cultural codes, which determine the acceptability or significance of emotional responses, cognitive assessments, and bodily experiences within a specific cultural context. The generation of meaning through system interaction is a dynamic process that relies on the continuous identification of relevant differences and their integration into both individual and collective contexts (Luhmann 1997a, 108; Bateson 1999, Chapter 3). This process is mediated and shaped by affective-cognitive-bodily schemata, which not only guide individual experiences and interpretations but are also influenced by cultural codes. These codes provide a common understanding and a shared language, thereby facilitating the transmission of meanings and contributing to the co-construction of social realities. Affective-cognitive-bodily schemata and cultural codings not only enable systems to decode messages but also facilitate the generation and adaptation of meanings that align with individual needs and collective norms and values. Consequently, the co-production of meaning should be regarded not as a linear or static process, but rather as a dynamic and iterative exchange that intricately interweaves individual experiences with cultural contexts (Rieger 2003, 327). The encoding of meanings represents a central mechanism of structural coupling, whereby one system transforms the differences noted by another into a format that is comprehensible and operational within its own framework. This process of encoding and decoding allows systems to modify information in a way that facilitates effective communication across the boundaries of individual systems.

2.2.8 Power, Domination, and Network-Hierarchies

A fundamental methodological assumption provides the foundation for the development and application of a transdisciplinary cognitive program for analyzing human differentiation. In this work, the sociocybernetic theories are employed primarily in a descriptive manner, rather than in a normative one. This approach eschews a rigid categorization of system types, instead focusing on the analysis of power dynamics, control, and the legitimization of power structures. This multifaceted analysis of power and domination is essential for understanding regimes of difference. In accordance with systems and complexity theory, power, domination, and, as will be demonstrated, “network hierarchies” are regarded as meta-codes, in a poststructuralist sense as relational conditions and simultaneously as macrosocial anthropological constants. This is particularly evident in highly differentiated contemporary societies, which communicate via cultural codes (see Chapter 8) and

thereby activate specific neurobiological systems, including System 1 (automated, intuitive processes) and System 2 (conscious, reflective processes) (see Chapters 3–5). These systems constitute the foundation for schemata that inform social practices and differentiations and are embedded in power and domination structures. This is to be understood as an attempt to adopt an integrative perspective on the psychological, biological, schema-related, anthropological, cultural, and geopolitical dimensions of social order discussed in the main chapters of this book. This is done in order to identify the ways in which power and domination structures are continuously reproduced and stabilized. In this analysis, the dimensions are not ordered hierarchically or given epistemological priority. Instead, a holistic approach is taken to reveal the complex interactions between the levels. This does not imply that one dimension is superior to the others. The goal is to analyze the diverse schemata and practices of human differentiation in the specific context of Germany, thereby shedding comprehensive light on the interconnections between cultural, biological, psychological, and geopolitical factors.

This study closely examines the inherent difficulties in governance, as well as the paradoxes and complexities that frequently emerge. These are often perceived as anti-democratic and conducive to the establishment of hierarchies. The analysis extends to the global repercussions of functional differentiation and its extensive consequences, including exploitation, wars, and inhumane practices. Furthermore, the analysis considers the generally oblivious stance of geopolitically privileged groups. It goes without saying that within privileged groups, many subgroups exist that are affected by exploitation and disadvantage on different levels and by no means lead an elite life, yet still belong to the privileged on a global scale. The present considerations focus on the phenomenon of power, examining the necessity of maintaining social systems and orders through the continuous reduction of complexity and the securing of resources. This encompasses hegemonic structures that are bolstered by military and political apparatus, as well as organizations that are structurally integrated with their respective populations and communicate with each other through distinct codes. In the context of *macrosocial anthropological constants*, the critical role of resource security for the survival and stability of empires is further elaborated in Chapter 7. The central argument of the present discussion is that no complex society can survive without efficiently and sustainably securing its energy sources. This proves the vital link between the maintenance of hierarchies and the control of essential resources. The structuring of hierarchies is not merely a characteristic of social order; it is also a vital element in ensuring the availability of resources that are crucial for the survival and prosperity of societies. In discussions of power and domination, the concept of morality is deliberately excluded from consideration. Historically, morality served as an integrative mechanism within earlier forms of social organization. However, since 1945, the prevailing secular norms have replaced these moral frameworks as a means of mitigating conflicts (Willke

2010, 19). This transition is embedded in the normative structures that shape hierarchies, power, and domination, particularly in relation to the role of democracy and markets. Beyond understanding human differentiation practices, the goal is also to explore how political majorities can be formed in the long term within entrenched social systems, rather than establishing definitive truths. All social systems, including hegemonies, are autopoietic, that is, they are capable of self-organization and self-reproduction. This understanding is of great importance for comprehending the dynamics of power and domination, particularly in relation to the processes that sustain social orders and power structures. The realization that each system autonomously ensures its own maintenance through self-referential and self-organizing processes evokes the necessity of resource management and complexity reduction as foundational elements within these systems. As a result of the continued expansion of globalization, the maintenance of these conditions has become an increasingly challenging endeavor. The pursuit of moral imperatives, particularly in the realms of politics and media, frequently manifests through the advocacy of universally framed concepts such as human rights. This phenomenon will be examined in greater detail in Chapter 8, where it will be discussed in the context of the cultural coding of “empty signifiers” (Laclau 2007). Nevertheless, the pursuit of a universal morality is ultimately futile due to its inherently circular nature. The issue is not with human rights themselves, but rather with the ongoing efforts to ground these rights in a source of legitimacy that is external to the social systems they seek to address morally (Willke 2010, 37). The external grounding of these systems frequently creates obstacles to the integration and acceptance of human rights within them. Moral arguments frequently assume the existence of an independent, universally recognized foundation, which is not an empirically verifiable proposition. However, no such basis exists, which ultimately renders attempts to establish a universal morality futile. The concept of functional differentiation gives rise to a multitude of moral and justifiable interpretations, which in turn places the notion of universal social justice under considerable strain. This fragmentation gives rise to a state of “moral confusion,” which is further compounded by the intensifying forces of globalization (Willke 2010, 62). As globalization becomes increasingly intertwined with all aspects of human life, the need for a global political governance system capable of coordinating these processes in a manner that is both just and legitimate remains a significant challenge. This absence is particularly evident in light of the waning of US hegemony, a phenomenon that will be further discussed in Chapter 10. The intrinsic necessity to diminish complexity and preserve social order requires the targeted and hierarchically organized coordination of these intricate processes. However, the nature of social systems indicates that they cannot be rigidly controlled or dominated hierarchically, as no single element or segment can exert control over the entire system. This implies an inherent limitation of power within social systems, which presents a significant challenge. The analysis acknowledges that human societies have histor-

ically generated and are likely to continue generating hierarchies. However, it also acknowledges that the very nature of power and hierarchies is undergoing significant transformations in the 21st century. This shift occurs within the context of globalization, which can be defined as a process in which the functional systems of contemporary, functionally differentiated societies are interconnected across national borders (Willke 2020, 10). These systems evolve within global contexts, establishing their own logics and operational modes, thereby progressively dissociating from the dictates of their originating nation-states (*ibid.*). The conventional view of power structures as strictly hierarchical and top-down is now being replaced by a recognition of a more intricate reality.

In the initial decades of the 21st century, the formation of hegemonic power is increasingly shaped by a combination of decentralized networks and a simultaneous centralized exercise of power. This phenomenon will be further examined in the subsequent sections of this book under the term “neoliberal regime.” It would be erroneous to assume that decentralized networks inherently promote egalitarianism. Rather, they tend to permeate existing hierarchies, which in turn can no longer be understood as straightforward top-down command systems (Williams 2020, 83). Instead, dynamic power structures emerge in which networks and hierarchies interlock and reinforce each other, with traditional distinctions between horizontal and vertical forms of organization becoming increasingly blurred. If social complexity is consistently linked to a dynamic understanding of power—both hierarchical and network-like—then central dimensions of hegemony in complex social systems can be derived. First and foremost, the phenomenon of hegemony in such systems is contingent upon the interactions between the various differentiated domains and functions. In this context, power and domination can be understood as a processes of utilizing, or even exploiting, the interactions between and within these functional areas. Moreover, complex hegemony offers fundamental principles that establishes an explanatory framework for understanding the integrated dynamics between different social spheres of activity, particularly with regard to human differentiation. In alignment with the perspectives of Gramsci and Foucault, the concept of power is fundamentally decentralized, no longer conceived as a centralized authority but rather as a phenomenon that is mediated by a multitude of social practices, discourses, and institutions. In addition to its direct role in domination, power also permeates social relations in subtle and often invisible ways. Gramsci places considerable emphasis on consent as a primary source of power (Gramsci 1971, 57), whereas Foucault directs attention to discursive and disciplinary mechanisms. Both perspectives view power as a productive force, influencing the formation and stabilization of identities, social orders, and norms. This perspective is based on the aforementioned approaches, particularly the system-stabilizing aspects (see Chapter 4.5 and Chapter 8.3), and expands the understanding of power by emphasizing the emergent, self-organizing, and self-reproducing properties of social systems. The concept of

power and domination is understood as a dynamic and adaptive phenomenon that is not limited to central actors or institutions. Rather, it arises through non-linear interactions between different functionally differentiated domains and their actors. These structures of power and domination give rise to behaviors that are deeply rooted in anthropological constants and result from feedback effects within a complex network of social and cultural processes. This indicates that power functions not only through hierarchical leadership or discursive control, but also through the emergent dynamics of networks that are constantly reorganizing themselves. Such forms and practices of power are not entirely predictable, as they are shaped by the interactions of the actors and structures involved, which in turn react to changes in their environment. This gives rise to power phenomena that operate at different levels and permeate both hierarchies and networks. The present approach broadens our understanding of these processes by incorporating anthropological, socio-psychological, and biologically evolved variables (see Chapters 3–6) that have been central to differentiation practices and human forms of domination since the Neolithic (see Chapter 7). These factors now constitute deterritorialized and decentral-ized regimes that are rooted in neoliberal practices (see Chapters 9 and 10). They operate both militarily and geopolitically through transnational networks, supra-national institutions, and global capital flows (Hardt and Negri 2001, 2009). As will be demonstrated in Chapter 10, this hegemony is no longer predicated on traditional forms of sovereignty; rather, it is based on the flexible and fluid structure of global capitalism. This structure is characterized by a capacity for dynamic adaptation and integration of various power actors, thereby creating a self-organizing and adaptable form of power that facilitates the management and consolidation of geopolitical and economic interests on a global scale. The functioning of domination is no longer based on physical coercion and direct control. Instead, it is carried out through subtle mechanisms of control, which are known as sociotechniques, and through the process of consensus-building. These mechanisms are deeply rooted in social and cultural practices of subjectivization and conditioning. Hardt and Negri further develop this approach by stressing the pivotal function of global networks and new technologies in reproducing and reinforcing power relations. This form of hegemony is emergent and self-organizing, as it arises from the interplay of economic, political, and cultural processes at the global level and reproduces itself continuously. The neoliberal regime is no longer constrained by traditional hierarchies or primordial codings; rather, it is defined by adaptive networks and decentralized power structures that facilitate flexibility and adaptability. The exercise of power and domination is becoming increasingly mediated by technological infrastructures, digital communication networks, and global markets. This results in the continuous reproduction of the hegemonic order, which is supported by autopoiesis, the principle of self-reproduction and self-maintenance of complex systems. In this sense, such regimes establish the conditions for a dynamic, self-sus-

taining power structure that operates on a global scale. This structure simultaneously integrates or neutralizes new forms of resistance, depending on their intensity and whether they reach a critical mass. Those resistance movements that lack sufficient strength to traverse this threshold are typically absorbed by the system, transformed, or incorporated into existing power structures. It is only when a movement has developed sufficient pressure and influence to reach this critical mass that it can potentially bring about a disruption of the hegemonic order. Otherwise, these movements remain constrained by the self-organizing processes of the neoliberal regime, where they become managed forms of dissent that do not pose a significant threat to the system's stability. Therefore, differentiation processes are intrinsic to the autopoiesis of social systems. Both discursive practices and deeply rooted cognitive-affective-physical schemata play a role in this process, collectively generating a complex and constantly evolving network of power relations. In this way, power becomes a fluid and adaptive principle that cannot be reduced to a clear hierarchy or a single discursive mechanism. Rather, it must be understood as the result of multiple interacting forces in a complex social system. Both Foucault and complexity theory recognize power as a dynamic and decentralized phenomenon. In both approaches, power is not regarded as a fixed, centralized phenomenon, but rather as a dynamic process embedded in everyday relationships, practices, and structures. Power is not solely repressive; it is also productive, as evidenced by its role in producing social orders, differentiations, and identities. In this context, the formation of the subject is understood similarly, but on the basis of different theories. Subjectivity itself emerges both through discourse and through non-linear interactions and systemic feedback effects between various functionally differentiated areas. The mechanisms of subjectivization and conditioning (see Chapter 8.3) are an indispensable element of the systemic-anthropological comprehension of power. Differentiation practices emerge through institutional and discursive mechanisms that constitute social categories such as normality and deviation and are stabilized through power-knowledge complexes. These mechanisms influence the formation of subjects and social identities by differentiating and marginalizing certain groups. The complexity theory approach offers a complementary perspective by incorporating the dimension of emergent dynamics within an adaptive social system. Additionally, it incorporates the anthropological and biological variables discussed in Chapters 3–6, which are reflected in the concept of schemata. The concept of power relations is understood in this context as a consequence of autopoiesis and adaptive processes that emerge through the interplay of networks and hierarchies. While power structures are shaped by centrally controlled practices, they are ultimately derived from the interactions of the actors and structures involved. Such systems are subject to constant change and adaptation, which can be described as a process of *guided self-organization* (Williams 2020, 138). In this approach, *hierarchies emerge within networks, and networks permeate existing hierarchies, which may be described as “network hierarchies.”*

The latter are contingent upon cultural codes that structurally couple the various elements of complex social systems. The interweaving of hierarchical and network- or “rhizome-like” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994) power relations, which extend across different interacting dimensions, is exemplified in detail in chapters 8 to 10. This exemplification makes clear how these different power structures interlock and mutually determine each other in dynamic processes, leading to a complex, constantly changing, and adaptive power constellation. This new perspective recognizes that power is dispersed across interconnected systems that feature both vertical and horizontal dynamics. An appreciation of the structure of social systems necessitates an understanding of the concepts of *vertical and horizontal differentiation*. The term “vertical differentiation” is employed to describe the hierarchical organization that exists within society. This differentiation is manifested in various forms, including disparities in power, status, and resource distribution, which can be observed in the existence of different classes or income brackets. In contrast, “horizontal differentiation” denotes the segmentation of society into disparate functional domains or sectors that coexist and fulfill distinct social roles. Such fields or systems include, for example, those of business, education, and religion. The current conceptualization of regimes of difference orders captures the interplay between these differentiations by integrating both vertical and horizontal structures. This integration illustrates the complex interconnections between hierarchical power structures and functional divisions. The intersectional overlaps demonstrated in this approach reveal how mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion operate across multiple levels, influenced by a confluence of social, cultural, and political dynamics that permeate both vertical hierarchies and horizontal sectors. From this perspective, hierarchies are not solely conceptualized in terms of dominance and submission; rather, they are also conceptualized in terms of their functional roles within networks. One might posit that power is not merely exerted through overt control, but also through the capacity to manage and influence information and knowledge. As a result, lateral world systems emerge, which in turn give rise to corresponding global institutions. It is noteworthy that politics represents a significant exception to this trend. A unified global political system remains largely absent, with democratic processes still significantly influenced by national boundaries. The United Nations Security Council represents a marginal exception to this rule (Willke 2023, 192). This dynamic and often paradoxical development—in which global institutions proliferate while the role of the nation-state is increasingly questioned—facilitates a deeper comprehension of the inherent complexities and tensions within contemporary social systems. These complexities and tensions become particularly evident when considering the global and hegemonic dimensions. The rise of global structures, occurring concurrently with the decline in the capacity of nation-states to govern, calls for a reassessment of our conceptualizations of power, governance, and justice in an increasingly interconnected world. This shift presents a challenge to the efficacy of traditional hierarchies and order

principles at a time when global issues have come to overshadow local solutions and the constraints on exercising power have become increasingly apparent. This scenario elucidates the paradox that, while hierarchy and order are indispensable for the stability and functionality of social systems, an overly rigid exertion of power can compromise the flexibility and adaptability of these systems. The current ambiguity regarding the role of nation-states in a globalized context is reflected in the challenges to implementing universal principles such as freedom, democracy, and justice. The ability of nation-states to govern is facing increasing scrutiny, even as citizens' expectations for state services and their efficacy grow, often placing undue strain on these structures. This intensifies the paradox of social justice in the context of the interplay between power and domination. The limited capacity of nation-states to govern and their impact on social justice give rise to significant questions. The growing intricacy of globally interconnected systems illustrates that conventional governance frameworks, founded upon the tenet of national sovereignty, are proving to be increasingly insufficient. This situation reveals a fundamental paradox inherent to liberal democracies: the discrepancy between the public's expectations of state services and the actual governance capabilities of states. The assumption that governments are capable of managing societies is undermined by the acknowledgment of the intricate and self-regulating nature of functionally differentiated societies. This gives rise to pressing concerns pertaining to self-referentiality and the self-governance capabilities of social systems, with power and domination occupying a pivotal role. The capacity of power structures within specific systems, such as political frameworks, to exert comprehensive societal control is inherently constrained. This is due to the profound paradoxes inherent to democratic systems and the limitations imposed by traditional conceptions of power, domination, and control. The discrepancy between the concept of globalized justice and the actuality of evolving, hierarchically structured power distributions, coupled with the diminishment of sovereignty through global neoliberal strategies, are crucial elements in comprehending human diversity. In contrast to the individual, the state cannot be understood in simplistic terms. This represents a common flaw in moralizing discourses that advocate for aid to poorer, exploited nations. The aspiration for a global equilibrium of justice between historically oppressed and oppressing entities has become increasingly impractical in this context. Such perspectives are similarly flawed due to their reliance on linear cause-and-effect reasoning, which fails to adequately capture the complexities of global interdependencies. In a context characterized by intricate power structures and dynamic power shifts, where losses of sovereignty due to global neoliberal strategies are evident, simplistic causal connections must be replaced with an appreciation for the intricate and reciprocal nature of global processes. Moreover, the advancement of justice and equality necessitates a shift in perspective that goes beyond the assumption that global justice issues can be resolved through isolated or sporadic actions. Instead, it requires a

continuous and critical examination of the structural elements that sustain inequality and injustice. It is similarly crucial to acknowledge the interdependence of the global economy and the free flow of information, which necessitates the formation of novel forms of cooperation and solidarity that transcend conventional boundaries and identities. The necessity of mechanisms to secure and legitimize stable power structures is evident; however, the inherent limitations of power also demonstrate the extent to which it can be effective. Power, which hinges on recognition and acceptance, may falter in the face of resistance, rejection, or a deficiency in legitimacy. The tension between the necessity of power to maintain social order and its intrinsic limitation or “fragility” (Willke 2014b, 137) reflects the intricate nature of dominance and control on a global scale. This limitation is consistent with the previously discussed concept of “moral confusion” and the evolving conceptions of justice within global contexts. The strategic and repetitive invocation of moral arguments in politics and the media often results in cyclical, exhaustive debates over the question of who holds the moral high ground. In conclusion, however, this question remains unresolved. Power and domination are relational and dynamic, continuously interacting with social, economic, and media structures in a complex and evolving manner. This interplay, shaped by a multitude of discourses and practices—including moralizations—illustrates the dynamic nature of power relations and their continuous renegotiation. In a globally connected world marked by interdependencies and a multitude of actors, the distribution of power is becoming increasingly decentralized and diversified. The structure of power relations is significantly influenced by non-state actors and transnational networks. The intrinsic contingency and uncertainty associated with issues of justice coincide with the inherent complexity of power relations, necessitating a theoretical approach that is sensitive to ambiguities and the need for adaptability. Simplistic moralizations that attempt to resolve complex power questions are inadequate and fail to capture the true dynamics of power and domination. Against this backdrop of limited power and the need for legitimacy, the fundamental paradox of governance re-emerges. This is because no single entity can effectively “lead” the whole, yet there appears to be no viable alternative to this arrangement. This situation exemplifies the inherent tension between the necessity for leadership within complex social systems and the practical infeasibility of any single entity—be it an individual, a group, or an institution—exercising complete control over the entire system. This paradox is particularly evident in democratic systems, where power is decentralized and grounded in the principle of popular representation. The democratic form of government is susceptible to two fundamental vulnerabilities inherent to this paradox (Reinbacher, Oberneder, and Wesenauer 2020, 218). *Firstly*, the inability to implement strategic, long-term decisions in democratic systems reflects the broader governance paradox, namely that leadership within complex systems is unable to effectively control the whole. This is attributable to the decentralized nature of power in democracies,

where the presence of multiple actors and competing interests renders the pursuit of unified, long-term goals challenging. The imperative for immediate electoral success frequently eclipses the necessity for long-term societal welfare, reflecting the difficulty in maintaining a strategic direction that aligns with the complex demands of a functionally differentiated society. *The second vulnerability* is the slow learning and adaptive processes of democracies, which also reflect the challenges of managing a complex, interconnected global system (ibid.). The necessity for consensus within a democratic system and the influence of diverse interest groups contribute to a system's inertia, which mirrors the broader difficulty of achieving coherent action in a globally networked and functionally differentiated world. This sluggishness in adaptation and learning indicates a broader issue: the capacity of a system to integrate new information and respond effectively to changing environments. This is crucial for managing the uncertainties and contingencies inherent in global power structures. Collectively, these shortcomings illustrate the inherent difficulties of democratic systems and the broader challenges associated with the management of power and governance in an increasingly complex and interconnected global environment.

2.2.9 Inclusion and Exclusion

Inclusion and exclusion constitute fundamental mechanisms within social systems, playing a pivotal role in their formation and structuring. In order to fully comprehend a social system, it is essential to acknowledge the elements that it excludes, given its intrinsic self-referential nature. These mechanisms are not only central to the formation of systems but also provide a foundation for differentiation theory, which elucidates the genesis and evolution of systems. *The inevitability of exclusions, the dynamics of negating exclusions, and their nuanced semantics are of paramount importance* for an understanding of the schemata and practices associated with human differentiation. This section will discuss these aspects and subsequently apply them to case studies within the framework of the schemata throughout this study. Moreover, the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion invariably possess a historical dimension, which will be elaborated upon later in this subsection, particularly concerning the socio-structural background essential for analyzing these mechanisms. In the period following the Second World War, liberal democracies have undergone significant developments, with members being categorized into subsystems based on a range of criteria and qualifications. Such categorizations are reflective of the historical and cultural contexts that exert influence and shape the structuring of social systems. The mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, along with the various forms of communication that accompany them, are considered an inherent and fundamental aspect of the processes of human differentiation. These mechanisms are deeply embedded within the structures of social systems, exerting a profound in-

fluence on the manner in which individuals and groups are included or excluded within these systems. The levels of interaction, organization, and society are fundamental to the social mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. These components determine who is included or excluded across a range of levels. At the level of interaction, personal encounters operate to shape perceptions of belonging. Organizations, through the establishment of formal structures and hierarchies, determine who is granted access to resources and positions. From a societal perspective, legal and political frameworks systematically include or exclude groups, with the support of ideological narratives that present themselves as fair while concealing underlying inequalities. The obfuscation or *denial of exclusions* and differentiations within the social systems of liberal democracies represents a pivotal aspect for the analysis and comprehension of the underlying structures and practices of human differentiation. In Western societies that are highly technologized and characterized by differentiation, there is a tendency to obscure the negations that occur within the context of inclusion and exclusion. Such societies frequently diminish the significance of exclusions and inequalities by espousing a narrative of universal equality of opportunity and fairness. This emphasis on formal equality and meritocracy has the effect of obscuring systemic disadvantages and exclusions (Stichweh 2016, 226). From the perspective of discourse analysis, dominant narratives espouse the principle of equality for all individuals. This, however, obscures the tangible barriers that systematically exclude certain demographic groups from participation. The implementation of ostensibly neutral rules and procedures by institutions has the effect of creating systematic disadvantages for specific groups. Individuals tend to internalize these social norms, leading them to perceive failure or exclusion as personal shortcomings rather than as the outcomes of structural inequities. The existence of such *mechanisms of negation and invisibilization* serves to complicate the perception and discussion of inclusion and exclusion, thereby inadvertently prolonging the persistence of existing inequalities. As will be discussed in greater detail later in this volume, the negation and invisibilization of exclusions are closely intertwined with system-stabilizing and ideological narratives that are structurally embedded in social systems via their cultural codes. Moreover, the phenomenon of negation and invisibilization is further compounded by the increasing number of individuals seeking inclusion within these social systems, particularly in the context of a globalized world society. Despite the aspirational thesis of full inclusion, which aims to integrate all individuals into all functional systems, the practical critiques and limitations of this ideal are readily apparent. The considerable number of individuals and groups seeking inclusion results in exclusions that are frequently subtle and implicit due to the limited capacity to accommodate all unaddressed entities. This situation demonstrates the practical constraints of comprehensive inclusion, rendering exclusions invisible and perpetuating the illusion of complete integration while many remain marginalized. The concept of comprehensive inclusion fails to account for the intrinsic boundaries

that exist within systems, which are negotiated and communicated in both explicit and implicit ways. The frank acknowledgment of exclusions is incongruent with the self-perception of Western liberal democracies, which aspire to be perceived as inclusive and just. Consequently, exclusions are frequently implemented in a subtle manner in order to maintain the perception of inclusivity. These implicit processes obscure the reality that full inclusion is impractical, as systems inherently operate with selectivity and limitations. A defining characteristic of Western democracies is the portrayal of exclusions as forms of inclusion, with the concept of “inclusion” frequently cited as an overarching code. The greater the frequency with which a term is employed, the more it tends to encompass its antithesis (Dumont 1980, 224). The simultaneous appearance of exclusions as inclusions is exemplified by the existence of total institutions, such as prisons (Foucault 2008), refugee shelters (Behnam Shad 2021), and mental institutions (Goffman 1961). Although these institutions appear to integrate individuals, they simultaneously function as mechanisms of exclusion within the broader social structure. These institutions are governed by precise regulations that delineate which authorizations and access rights remain in effect even within their confines. From the sociocybernetic perspective, this presents a seemingly contradictory phenomenon: social systems maintain and stabilize themselves through the simultaneous inclusion of some and the exclusion of others. These exclusionary processes are frequently obscured by their presentation as forms of inclusion. This illustrates that inclusion and exclusion are not only concurrent but also interdependent, jointly shaping the boundaries and functionality of social systems. In this regard, Stichweh’s examination of inclusion and exclusion as a hierarchical opposition is particularly illuminating (Stichweh 2016, 228). The contemporary practice of exclusion is frequently presented in the context of ideologies of resocialization and reintegration. In this context, the exclusions that result from such practices are regarded as provisional measures with the objective of eventual reintegration. This interpretation, which views inclusion and exclusion as hierarchical opposites, acknowledges both the distinctiveness of the divisions and the dynamic, potentially reversible nature of these situations. In many cases, inclusion occurs concurrently with exclusion. Conversely, an extensive and time-consuming inclusion effort may preclude the possibility of pursuing other commitments simultaneously. The hierarchical aspect of the dialectic between inclusion and exclusion does not imply stability or immutability. In contrast, the two-level structure of this opposition drives the dynamics within the relationships of inclusion and exclusion. From the perspective of systems theory, this illustrates that social systems are inherently structured through a dual movement of inclusion and exclusion. These processes are perpetually in flux, ensuring that the boundaries and functionality of social systems remain dynamic and adaptable. Inclusion and exclusion are mutually reinforcing processes that collectively shape the social order and its continual transformations. This dynamic also gives rise to a covert approach to managing exclusions, whereby they are presented

as forms of inclusion. It is evident that social systems maintain their stability and adaptability by managing these dual processes in a flexible manner. The development of analytics for understanding inclusion and exclusion draws upon two significant socio-structural backdrops. The first is the reliance of social systems on communication, which is a key factor in understanding the role of participation in these communicative processes. Secondly, the diversification of reference systems results in a complex array of participations across various social systems, leading to a web of simultaneous, interconnected, or distinct inclusions and exclusions (*ibid.*, 179). The examination of inclusion and exclusion within functionally differentiated societies is becoming increasingly vital, particularly in view of the pivotal role of communication as a foundational mechanism of social interaction in contemporary frameworks. Contemporary social systems are distinguished by their capacity to segregate themselves from their environments through communicative processes, as elucidated in discussions on the various theoretical aspects of systems theory. In this context, the processes of inclusion and exclusion constitute the primary regulatory mechanisms that define the limits of participation within these systems. These systems are markedly selective, determining inclusion and exclusion based on precise criteria and designated functions (Stichweh 2016, 180). The dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in social systems are highly contingent and mutable. These mechanisms are subject to constant change, influenced by shifts in the political, economic, and cultural landscapes, which in turn redefine the criteria for participation and exclusion. In light of these developments, there has been a notable shift in emphasis within Western contexts, moving away from traditional approaches to poverty and inequality and towards a more concentrated examination of inclusion and exclusion in communicative processes. Historically, poverty was primarily conceptualized as a material hardship, characterized by poor housing conditions or malnutrition. In the contemporary era, however, poverty is increasingly defined in terms of social exclusion and powerlessness, as evidenced by restricted social participation and limited communication opportunities. The advent of neoliberal policies has prompted a shift in the discourse surrounding poverty and inequality. These policies have resulted in a conceptualization of poverty as a form of socio-economic exclusion and lack of agency, which has in turn given rise to frameworks that prioritize inclusion and exclusion. The advent of a market-oriented society, accompanied by a reduction in state intervention, has resulted in the emergence of more nuanced structural inequalities, while simultaneously reaffirming the significance of individual responsibility. This shift necessitates a comprehensive examination of the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion to gain a more profound understanding of the social dynamics that emerge within neoliberal contexts. The evolving conceptualization of poverty is reflected in the increasing prominence of information and communication theories within the social sciences. This theoretical shift is less an independent innovation than a response to the structural transformations brought about by the

communication-centric nature of current social systems. In social systems that are based on communication and are pluralistic in nature, the personal environments of individuals are either included or excluded. These processes can be elucidated by two fundamental dimensions of human differentiation practices: the situational mechanism of addressing individuals and the structure-forming mechanism of forming expectations toward these individuals.

In the German context, *primordial coded* characteristics such as ethnicity, gender, and origin (see Section 8.1.2.1) play a pivotal role in the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. The term “situational mechanism” is employed to describe immediate, situation-related decisions based on these immutable characteristics. To illustrate, individuals with a migration background frequently encounter disadvantages in the German labor market, particularly those with discernible ethnic characteristics. A review of the literature indicates that applications with names that are perceived as foreign are less likely to result in job interviews, even when the qualifications of the applicant are deemed to be equivalent (Kaas and Manger 2012; Carlsson, Fumarco, and Rooth 2018). A comparable bias is discernible in the housing market, where landlords frequently demonstrate a proclivity for applicants who lack a migration background. This preference becomes manifest during property viewings (Auspurg, Lorenz, and Schneck 2023; Horr, Hunkler, and Kroneberg 2018; Sawert 2020). The influence of gender on inclusion and exclusion is also a significant factor. Women frequently experience professional setbacks, such as a lack of promotion opportunities and diminished influence in meetings, which are largely attributed to pervasive gender stereotypes (Weichselbaumer and Winter-Ebmer 2005; Birkelund et al. 2021; Weichselbaumer 2020; Fernández-Reino, Di Stasio, and Veit 2023). Moreover, it has been observed that concerns about personal safety have prompted women to avoid certain locations and activities, such as using public transportation at night. Such avoidance can manifest in subtle forms of social exclusion.

An individual's socioeconomic background represents another significant contributing factor. In the context of the education system, children from families with limited educational resources or belonging to certain social classes may be subject to discriminatory practices. Such attitudes may manifest as teachers holding less ambitious expectations for these children, which may subsequently impact their educational opportunities and outcomes (Steinmann 2019; Rusert and Stein 2023; Kunyu et al. 2020; Dollmann 2021; Kristen and Granato 2007; Schuller 2018; Diehl, Hunkler, and Kristen 2016). In everyday life, the phenomenon of exclusion from specific social circles on the basis of one's region of origin or social class is a common occurrence. This is evidenced by the prevalence of such experiences in everyday discourse and social activities. The term “situational mechanism” is employed to draw attention to the context-dependent and frequently implicit nature of these decisions. These mechanisms are triggered in specific situations, directly influencing whether an individual is included or excluded. In Germany, such mechanisms are especially significant,

as they are deeply embedded in everyday social interactions and institutional processes.

In addition to primordially coded characteristics, the role of neoliberal coding in practices of differentiation and hierarchization is also of crucial importance (for further details, please see Chapter 9). The formation of expectations is frequently informed by neoliberal criteria, including economic performance, professional qualifications, and social status. These long-term, structural expectations exert a significant influence on how individuals are perceived and treated within a system and ultimately determine whether they are integrated into or excluded from it. In a neoliberal context, an individual's worth is frequently evaluated based on their economic productivity and contribution to the market economy. Consequently, individuals with higher incomes and greater economic capital are often the beneficiaries of preferential treatment. In Germany, this dynamic is evident in the healthcare sector, where individuals with private health insurance typically receive superior and more expedient access to medical services in comparison to those with statutory insurance. Furthermore, economic performance has a considerable impact on housing options, with wealthier individuals able to access more desirable neighborhoods and higher-quality properties (Pfeifer 2011; Trappmann et al. 2019). The neoliberal discourse places a significant emphasis on professional qualifications and continuous training. This approach posits that individuals with higher qualifications will enjoy enhanced career opportunities and greater social recognition. The prevailing orientation of labor market policies is to promote the interests of highly skilled workers, which often has the consequence of reducing the support and improving the working conditions of low-skilled workers. Those who are long-term unemployed and possess low levels of skill are collectively perceived as less valuable to the economic system, resulting in their marginalization. A further significant criterion of neoliberalism is social status, which is closely associated with consumer behavior and participation in social networks. This is evident in the differential access to social and cultural facilities. Those with higher social status are more likely to gain access to high-quality educational institutions and cultural events. These networks and the associated social capital strengthen their position within society, thereby facilitating access to further resources and opportunities. Conversely, individuals of lower social status often have limited opportunities to engage with such networks, which consequently maintains their marginalized position. In contemporary societies, the processes of inclusion and exclusion are not merely one-dimensional or linear states of belonging or non-belonging. Rather, they result from complex interactions among various subsystems. In terms of exclusion, this may entail the failure to acknowledge the individual in question or the dissolution of previously held expectations regarding them. The phenomenon of exclusion is particularly pronounced when it occurs in a cumulative manner across several subsystems or in a sequential linkage. Although individual instances of non-belonging may initially appear inconsequen-

tial, they can have significant implications for those affected when these exclusions are compounded and interconnected, often in an intersectional manner, leading to widespread social exclusion. It is therefore evident that an analysis of inclusion and exclusion within a pluralistic society is of great importance, given that multiple, interconnected, or independent inclusions and exclusions coexist (Stichweh 2016, 183).

In order to elucidate the nuances within the analytics of inclusion and exclusion, it is essential to understand the structural conditions that form the foundation for these concepts. These conditions pertain to the way individuals and groups perceived as “different” are treated and recognized. The initial structural condition pertains to one’s status within a social system, which is conveyed through a multitude of codes. This membership requires that social systems maintain a degree of closure, enabling them to differentiate between those who are considered insiders and those who are regarded as outsiders. A second condition pertains to the way individuals perceive “others” as discrete and clearly delineated social entities. This perception often results in individuals being viewed as a unified entity, which can lead to the neglect of their distinctive attributes and complexities. Historically, societies have utilized this reductionist perspective of the “other” to determine whether an individual should be incorporated as a member or marginalized. The third structural feature examines the intricate relationship between historical semantics and the sociology of difference markers. This approach employs a multi-level model that conceptualizes society in several hierarchically organized strata, thereby facilitating the development of a comprehensive social theory. Each layer within this model establishes specific norms and expectations for individuals and possesses unique mechanisms for inclusion or exclusion. This permits a sophisticated comprehension of the multifaceted and frequently intersecting nature of social interactions and power dynamics. Moreover, the concept of intersectionality builds upon this multi-level framework by identifying the intersections of various social categories and their impact on individual experiences and identities. This perspective permits an examination of the ways in which an individual may simultaneously traverse multiple social strata, and of how such interactions shape the individual’s inclusion or exclusion within diverse social systems. The intersectional approach demonstrates that the inclusion or exclusion of individuals is not determined by a single characteristic or social category, but rather by the complex interplay of multiple identity facets across different social levels. In a socially differentiated system that is organized *both horizontally and vertically* (see Chapter 2.2.8), which encompasses a multitude of independent systems along with hierarchical structures, it is essential to recognize the multidimensional nature of social interactions. This complex organization enables each system to apply distinct criteria for inclusion and exclusion at varying levels, from the local to the national. As will be discussed in greater detail later in this book, the principle of intersectionality is an invaluable tool for grasping

the intricate dynamics of inclusion and exclusion within the two dominant orders of difference: the primordially coded and the neoliberally coded regimes (see Chapter 9). This perspective is particularly pertinent when considering the integration of refugees, who navigate these regimes across various sectors, including healthcare, education, and employment, and at different administrative levels. The concept of intersectionality affords a more profound examination of the pervasive nature of these inclusion and exclusion mechanisms. This illustrates that the various identity traits and social categories are not operating in isolation but rather are embedded in a complex network of relationships that shape and influence the structural conditions within these regimes. These insights are essential for comprehending the intricacies of social reality, where individuals are subject to a multitude of forces, often contradictory and non-linear, that act simultaneously. Such complexity indicates the profound and inescapable embedding of systems of inclusion and exclusion within the social structures of contemporary liberal democracies. In these systems, individuals are included or excluded in specific systems on a selective basis and to varying degrees. In this context, individuals are consistently included or excluded from specific systems in a selective manner and to varying degrees. In addition to the aforementioned factors, subsequent chapters will examine other pivotal elements of group-based inclusion and exclusion dynamics. These dynamics are integrated into the theory of schemes and practices of human differentiation in a systematic manner. This theory elucidates the processes through which individuals gain or are denied access to resources, opportunities, and social networks. It identifies the mechanisms that underpin the apparent inclusiveness and exclusivity of social structures and elucidates the structural conditions that enable and give rise to these dynamics.