Chapter 3. Conflict Escalation: Developing a Systems Theoretical Framework

> "So that I may perceive whatever holds
> The world together in its inmost folds."
> *(J. W. Goethe, Faust – The First Part of the Tragedy, 1808)*

"The following considerations assume that there are systems." The first chapter of Niklas Luhmann's magnum opus *Social Systems* begins with these lapidary and, at the same time, grandiloquent words (Luhmann 1995: 12). Indeed, system metaphors and ideas have become part of the standard vocabulary, not only in social sciences. Even beyond sociology and political science, 'systems theory' has become an umbrella term for different perspectives and levels of analysis, as for example widespread references to 'political systems', 'ecosystems' or 'computer systems' suggest. Their common denominator: a system is composed of particular units that interact with each other; it constitutes more than the sum of its parts and thus has qualities of its own. As everyday examples show, even without puting Luhmann's huge theoretical superstructure into play, the systems analogy seems to be greatly useful to order and to make sense of complex phenomena in the world.

So, why does the present work draw on Luhmannian systems theory? And, on top of this, why should Luhmann be brought to PCS at all? Although Luhmann has often been portrayed as one of the most important sociologists of the 20th century, in international social sciences literature, Luhmannian systems theory, due to its sparse translation into English, still lives in the shadow. According to Albert (2007), it faces persistent prejudices (anti-empiricism, ivory tower research, excessive complexity, etc.) and a widespread reluctance to work across disciplines. Furthermore, as Moeller (2012: 10–15) pointedly adds, the brilliance of Luhmann's theory is diametrically opposed to the fact that he wrote such "soporific" and "bad books". Of course, he was part of a special intellectual heritage and a corresponding (German) academic discourse at that time. In this context, his highly academic and seemingly elitist writing style was even strengthened by a narrative and scattering way of pursuing thoughts and by the not so humble aspiration to provide a

'supertheory', i.e. a theoretical framework that, in principle, covers all aspects of social life.

> "Reading Luhmann compares to listening to techno music: It makes no difference if the reader mentally zones out for a few chapters. Everything repeats itself constantly: [Luhmann] juggles with a small set of accurately defined basic concepts – meaning, communication, system, environment." (Lindemann 2008; own translation)

Moreover, Luhmann's systems theory was (and still is) perceived as 'conservative' and thus as opposing the dominant *zeitgeist* since it estimates the possibilities to purposefully influence social processes by individual/collective action as very limited. However, as the following considerations argue, Luhmannian systems theory entails an enormous potential to widen horizons of contemporary conflict studies.

As a coup d'oeil into the tables of contents of state-of-the-art sources reveals, PCS has become exceedingly differentiated since its beginngings as a field of research.[1] Today, PCS' self-perception is characterised by a high level of pluralism (Bonacker 2011: 67–71). In fact, besides a more or less outspoken commitment to do research for/on peace as a separate topic[2], there are sparse uniting elements in the broad field of PCS. Quite the contrary, as for example there seem to be fewer and fewer common analytical concepts conflict phenomena could be attributed to and, as the question of how far application-oriented research should go further fuels debates, one could get the impression that the field has obviously drifted apart or that some trends in the field have even manoeuvred themselves into dead ends.[3] Against the background of the present study, bringing Luhmann to PCS represents an attempt to uncover a common conceptual thread in the field: communication.

Concerning the encompassing scope of its aspirations, Luhmann's systems theoretical thinking can indeed be viewed as "radical" (Moeller 2012: 3–9; Martinsen 2014: 22–26). Society, in its broadest sense, is constituted by different social systems. Social systems, in turn, consist of nothing but communication. To put it straight, society is supposed to

1 See e.g. Webel and Galtung (2007), Sandole et al. (2009), Schlotter and Wisotzki (2011) or Bonacker (2011).

2 As e.g. Schlotter and Wisotzki emphasise (from a German PCS community perspective), "Peace studies have not been brought into being in order to behave neutrally towards its subject-matter [...]. Peace studies cannot get along without a normative orientation that is aligned to changing those social and political conditions inhibiting chances of peace." (Schlotter and Wisotzki 2011: 36–37; own translation)

3 Relating to the debate on the need for and the limits of application-oriented research in PCS, dealing e.g. with the status of expertise in the political discourse or the controversy about "government-commissioned research" see Ruf (2009) or Bonacker (2011). For an example of a recent progressive discussion on the concept of "civilian conflict management" in PCS, see Gulowski and Weller (2017; see also chapter 8). Concerning the dead ends of some approaches in PCS, see e.g. the (not so hidden) circular argument behind the "failed states" debate: On the one hand, it is argued that failed states represent a central cause of violent conflict (escalation). On the other hand, limited statehood itself is understood as a product of already existing conflicts (see Bonacker and Weller 2006: 21–22; Chojnacki and Namberger 2014: 178–181).

be an effect of social reality construction through communication only.[4] In this sense, all social phenomena ultimately trace back to communicative processes. Therefore, as this chapter elaborates step by step, Luhmannian systems theory not only provides a productive theoretical basis to look at conflicts in a different light, namely as specific types of social systems that are embedded in other social systems; it also enables observers to comprehend the legitimisation of collective violence as part of a spiral of communicative attributions in a particular discursive setting.

To lay the foundation for the approach developed in the present study, the first section of chapter 3 ("Luhmann Revisited") outlines the theoretical underpinnings of a systems theory approach to do empirical research on conflicts. In doing so, it reviews the key concepts of communication and social systems. The second section ("Opening Horizons: A World Societal Framework") elaborates on the crucial idea that social conflicts, in an impartial and broad systems theoretical perspective, are understood as being inherently embedded in a world societal communicative framework. Therefore, it is argued that conflict escalation represents a process of social change growing out of discursive arenas in world society. Finally, the last section provides a brief summary ("A Systems Theoretical World Society Perspective: What's In It for Conflict Studies?") in order to lead over to Chapter 4, which further pursues the development of an appropriate method(odology) within an empirical research programme.

3.1 Luhmann Revisited

> "The world does not speak. Only we do."
> *(Rorty 1989: 6)*

In Luhmann's view, the answer to Faust's existential concern (see introductory quote to chapter 3 above) is clear-cut: It is communication that holds the world together (see Luhmann 1995: 137–176). Taking this fundamental proposition as a starting point, the following remarks deal with the three central buildings blocks of Luhmannian systems theoretical thinking: a theory of communication, a theory of social systems, and a constructivist epistemology, i.e. "operational constructivism" (Bonacker 2008: 267–271). Against this background, a systems theoretical understanding of conflict will then be expounded.

The world, or, in Immanuel Kant's words, the "things in themselves", cannot be logically accessed and objectively experienced by means of whatsoever right criteria in empirical research.[5] And, as a matter of course, things are not self-evident, and they cannot

4 As Moeller (2012: 5–6) states, Luhmann's "radicalism" particularly consists in "deanthropologizing the description of society and of the world in general" inasmuch as human agency or actorness is not seen as absolute but contingent. Hence, following Luhmann (see e.g. 1995: 157–163), the focus is not on individuals or human beings as such but on communication as a process of selection whereby in certain (conflict) contexts some communicative addresses (e.g. "collective identities" individuals are attributed to) become more obvious than others.

5 For this see the respective passage from Kant's *Prolegomena*: "Everything that is to be given to us as object must be given to us in intuition. But all our intuition happens only by means of the senses; […] the senses never and in no single instance enable to cognize things in themselves but only their

speak themselves. As can be learned from the *linguistic turn* and constructivist thinking in social sciences, the world is moderated by language, symbols and discourses.[6] To put it in a systems theoretical and at the same time everyday language: If we talk about the world, we communicate our observations of the world. These observations can be conceived of as distinctions and indications; this conceptual pair goes back to Brown (1972) and has been taken up again by Luhmann (1995: 66). From a systems theory perspective, the ultimate merit of an observation is a double one: Observers *distinguish* between different phenomena by choosing specific phenomena (from an amount of potentially perceivable phenomena) that form a specific entity, which is separated from the rest of the world (environment). At the same time observers *indicate* this entity by attributing terms and features (see Simon 2012: 14–17). However, since the observer cannot be part of the phenomenon observed or since observers cannot observe themselves (i.e. their own mode of distinction/indication), there will always be a 'blind spot' of observation. Reality can thus only be perceived and described by distinctions and indications that are brought into the world by observers (see Luhmann 2002: 139–142).

To be articulated, observations, as outlined above, need to take recourse to language and symbols. They are thus necessarily linked to preceding observations and their inherent meaning, which is thereby confirmed, refused, or, more generally, reproduced. In this context, communication shows a contingent character: it constitutes its own frame of reference, its own horizon. Hence, by selecting communication generates information, which is then, at the same time, imparted or articulated (in one way or other) as well as understood, whereas 'understanding' also includes all forms of misunderstanding.[7] Consequently, communication represents a unity of three components: information, utterance and understanding (see Luhmann 1995: 139–150). Taking as point of departure that what is increasingly referred to as *communicative turn* in the social sciences (see Albert et al. 2008), it is argued that communication constitutes the basis of all social structures and processes. This is obviously different from analytically getting hold of the world by considering certain given sets of actors and their interactions. In other words, 'the social', i.e. collective structures such as (in)formal institutions, norms, identities or specific subject-positions like 'friend', 'opponent', 'rebel' or 'secessionist' are understood as being

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appearances and as these are mere representations of sensibility, consequently all bodies together with the space in which they are found must be taken for nothing but mere representations in us, and exist nowhere else than merely in our thoughts." (Kant 2004[1783]: 40)

6 See particularly Fearon and Wendt (2002), Ulbert (2005) and Martinsen (2014). Nota bene: Evidently, the linguistic turn represents a paradigmatic change that affected (and still affects) way more than the social sciences. It would go beyond the scope of this section to portray its profound impact in all (sub-) disciplines. However, broadly speaking, the linguistic turn particularly refers to the insight that the meaning of words and actions are communicatively defined (see e.g. Cienki and Yanow 2013; Angermüller 2014: 20–21). Following this, truth is a matter of convention and consensus and science represents just one 'language game' among others. As far as the impact of the linguistic turn in IR/PCS is concerned see Albert et al. (2008: 52–56) and Bonacker (2011: 67–71).

7 According to Vogd (2005: 116), in social situations, "misunderstanding" is the rule rather than the exception. Here it becomes evident that 'understanding' is not meant in the common everyday sense of the word. In Luhmannian systems theory, understanding relates to *any* communicative connection that recursively refers to a prior communication, be it affirming or denying (see Kalthoff 2008: 132).

exclusively produced within communication. Hence, all social phenomena (e.g. violent conflicts), first and foremost, represent discursive events that 'materialise' via processes of interlinking (linguistic, symbolic) communication.

According to systems theory, society can be defined as the totality of communications that are interlinked which means able to actually or potentially reach each other. Society is thus constituted of and reproduced by communication (see Luhmann 1995: 15). If communication is permanently processed beyond the level of simple interaction, stable structures of mutual expectations, or, to put it in Luhmann's words, "social systems" will develop. Social systems reduce complexity by providing reservoirs of meaning, i.e. stocks of distinctions and indications 'on call'. Moreover, social systems have the ability to reproduce their own constitutive elements and thereby to demarcate themselves from the environment (see concept of "autopoiesis"; Luhmann 1995: 205–209; 359–360). Based on the systems theoretical assumption of functional differentiation[8], modern society predominantly consists of different subsystems (e.g. politics, economy, law, science, religion, or mass media[9]) having exclusive functions and specific generalised media of communication that enable "connectivity" (Kneer and Nassehi 2000: 131–141): As to the political subsystem, in one way or other, any communication relates to having binding decision-making power or not; in economy, all actions turn on being able to pay for various scarce resources or not; the subsystem of law literally judges the world on the basis of the code legal/illegal; in sciences, the question is whether a scientific statement is correct or not, if not to say true or untrue[10]; religious communication is about how to get salvation and a decent standard of life; and finally, at the end of this non-exhaustive short list, the subsystem of mass media[11] processes on the basis of the code information (i.e. news) or non-

8 According to systems theory, there are three main forms of differentiation: Segmentary, stratificatory and functional differentiation. "Segmentary differentiation is where every social subsystem is the equal of, and functionally similar to, every other social system (e.g. families, clans, or states as 'like units'). Stratificatory differentiation is where some persons or groups raise themselves above others, creating a hierarchical order (e.g. feudal orders or hegemonic power structures). Functional differentiation is where the subsystems are defined by the coherence of particular types of activity and their differentiation from other types of activity, i.e. a certain kind of 'division of labour'. It points to an increasing division into legal, political, military, economic, scientific, religious and suchlike distinct and specialized subsystems" (Buzan and Albert 2010: 318). On the one hand, the historical evolution up to contemporary (world) society can be understood as a succession of these three forms of differentiation. On the other hand, world society can be nowadays characterised by the co-presence of all forms of differentiation (see e.g. Kneer and Nassehi 2000: 122–141; Luhmann 2013[1997]: Chapter 4).

9 Based on Luhmann's work and taking into account what has been published following Luhmann, Roth (2014) compiled a list of 10 social subsystems composing modern society.

10 On this, see Luhmann's *The Science of Society* (1990: 274; translation R.B., italics added): "Only science deals with coded truth. [...] only science is about the claim that *true claims* implicate a precedent validation and rejection of their *eventual untruth*. Since this validation can never be completed, only in science, the *symbol of truth* always has a hypothetical meaning."

11 According to Luhmann (1996: 10), "the term 'mass media' includes all those institutions of society which make use of copying technologies to disseminate communication. This means principally books, magazines and newspapers manufactured by the printing press but also all kinds of photographic or electronic copying procedures, provided that they generate large quantities of products

information.[12] Now, the pivotal question is how these subsystems can be scientifically observed in action.

Along these lines, operative constructivism forms the epistemological basis of Luhmann's systems theoretical thinking. In this context, the concept of observation is crucial. Political or social realities thus represent outcomes of specific observations, i.e. collective processes of attributing meaning. In principle, this also applies for scientific world views, dominant research paradigms and, therefore, for each and every research project as well:

> "You have to organize your research in an autological way, i.e. you have to pay regard to possible inferences on your own action. […] Results of research can retransform into research conditions." (Luhmann 1990: 9; own translation)

To meet this claim, empirical research is supposed to consider different 'modes of observation' that affect the way reality is perceived. In other words, researchers (in conflict studies) are observers (among many others) who can indeed observe (i.e. describe, categorise, analyse etc.) other observers with due regard to the distinctions and indications the observed observer uses. Conducted in this way, research provides 'second-order observations'.[13] This can be illustrated with an example from the Malian case study: After the MNA published its founding statement in November 2010, declaring that the MNA intends to be a peaceful political player within the Malian society,

> "The MNA declares that it adopts the way of political and legal action to require all rights. The MNA rejects violence and condemns terrorism in all its forms, both committed by the state and individuals. The MNA determinedly emphasises the necessity to differentiate between terrorism and legitimate resistance of the peaceful people of Azawad." (Founding Statement, MNA 1.11.2010),

the Malian newspaper *22 Septembre* refers to the same declaration as if it supports the one and only conclusion that a rebellion would be imminent at any moment and that the MNA agenda would be an existential threat to Malian state as such,

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whose target groups are as yet undetermined. Also included in the term is the dissemination of communication via broadcasting, provided that is is generally accessible."

12 Once an information gets articulated in form of a communicative event, it becomes a non-information. Therefore, a message that gets published a second time indeed keeps its meaning but loses its information value (see Luhmann 1996: 32–48). The function of mass media is thus to reproduce artefacts, i.e. information worth of being recorded (see Roth 2014: 16–18).

13 See particularly Luhmann (1990: 14–16; 2005[1990]: 7–8), Weller (2005b), Stichweh (2010), and Simon (2012). Nota bene: Of course, as mentioned earlier, any observation has its blind spot that cannot be seen through at the very same level, but from a 'higher' standpoint. Therefore, observation, in principle, implies an infinite regress, i.e. an endless asking for observers of observers of observers… Or, in Luhmann's words, "They said 'God is dead' – and meant: the last observer cannot be identified" (Luhmann 1996: 210; see also Luhmann 1990: 668–670; Fuchs 2010: 82).

> "Birth of the MNA in Timbuktu: A new rebellion or sabre rattling? Thanks to the oil in the grand desert of Timbuktu – Goodbye to the unity and indivisibility of the territory near and dear to all Malians." (Le 22 Septembre/Maliweb 4.11.2010a),

whereas the government, in anticipation of the proximate foundation of the MNA, launches a new multi-billion development programme ("Special Programme for Peace, Security and Development in Northern Mali"),

> "Growing insecurity in this zone hinders the effective functioning of the administration, discourages our development partners and their missions and promotes banditry and black markets in all forms. We have to ensure security in this zone in order to foster development." (GovMali 29.10.2010)

As this short sequence of communication suggests, there are obviously different descriptions, perceptions, and interpretations of the situation (first-order-observations) which, in turn, point to diverging modes of observation at work. Therefore, from a second-order-observation perspective, given the text material, it is crucial to ask empirically inspired questions aiming at identifying generic principles, i.e. distinctions and indications behind the superficial discursive layers, for example:

- What are the implicit/explicit distinctions that underpin particular speech acts?
- What has been said in reference to what could have been said?
- How was the initial information processed and reproduced?
- What are the different meanings attributed to "the people of Azawad" and a "national movement"?
- What about its relation to political commitment and "unity"/"indivisibility"?
- Is there a thematic ordering principle behind the notions "terrorism", "resistance", and "banditry"?
- What is declared being a political, legal, or economic problem?
- What is 'the conflict' seen through the lenses of the different speakers?

Against the background of this selection of general and case-specific questions[14], even a cursory attempt to think about answers shows that, for example, the distinctions used to qualify the Malian nation state and, as a consequence thereof, the ideas of what constitutes "the Malian people" are obviously diverging. More precisely, the text passages mark a contradiction between an all-encompassing idea of a "united" and "indivisible" Malian nation and the idea of a separate "people of Azawad" living among other ethnic groups in Mali. Also, as the MNA appears on the political scene, its self-description portrays a new player being intent on peacefully fighting for the Tuareg's interests as an ethnic group; at the same time, this presentation is contradicted inasmuch as its behaviour is characterised as possibly illegitimate separatist activism or as a result of underdevelopment and delinquency. Having said that, thinking of the MNA as an organisation that has a serious and legitimate commitment to advocate for minority rights *within* (and not

14 The set of questions used in the case studies is outlined in chapter 4.4 on the work plan.

against) the Malian state seems to be no interpretative option, at least with reference to the above-cited text passages. As these cursory considerations illustrate, analysing communication in a larger discursive context brings contradictions to light. In the course of the next sections, it will become evident how the processing of contradictions embodies the development of a conflict.

A systems theoretical understanding of conflict

As stated earlier in the introduction, conflicts do not speak. In other words, an incompatibility of subject positions, be it in the form of contradicting interests, values, or identities, only then becomes meaningful when observed and articulated as such. In this sense, the systems theoretical stance of this study suggests understanding conflict as exclusively produced within and thus by communication.

> "We will therefore speak of conflict when a communication is contradicted, or when a contradiction is communicated. A conflict is the operative autonomization of a contradiction through communication. Thus, a conflict exists when expectations are communicated and the nonacceptance of the communication is communicated in return." (Luhmann 1995: 388).

As can be learned from the 'classics' in conflict theory – Simmel, Coser, Dahrendorf – that have been taken as a point of departure in chapter 2, conflicts here are not understood as dysfunctional and pathological phenomena. Instead, they are recognised as ubiquitous elements of everyday life and important drivers of social change both on the large and small scale (see Weller 2020a; see also chapter 8). Hence, the present study is interested in analysing conflict escalation which means in exploring how some of these contradictions become meaningful conflicts in a broader societal context and even end up in situations of organised collective violence. Here the concept of social systems comes into play: If and only if contradictions give reason to subsequent communication of nonacceptance, a social process begins to stabilise in the form of a 'structure of negative expectations'. Contradictions are thus understood as mutually refusing offers of attributing meaning which means competing ways of distinguishing and indicating a phenomenon of interest. In Luhmann's words, "contradictions create moments of ambiguity and indefiniteness" (Luhmann 1995: 360). However, if the articulation of a specific thematic contradiction becomes a rule, or, in other words, a generalised expectation, it can be called a conflict system. As any other social subsystem, conflict systems, too, process the basic distinction between ego and alter; they attribute stable expectations of a 'no' to persons (individuals), roles (role models), programmes (interests, strategies), and norms (ideas, values, moral concepts).[15]

Against this background, conflicts here are conceptualised as social systems in their own right. Conflict systems are characterised by the fact that the communication of con-

15 According to Luhmann (1984: 426–436), the basic identities of a social system (ego and alter) can be identified with reference to these four layers (with increasing abstraction): persons, roles, programmes and norms (for further details on the implementation of Luhmann's concept of identity in this study's empirical part see section 4.1).

tradictions not only implicates an immanent tendency to continuation to dissolve the ambiguity of meaning but also a drive to expansion. In this sense, they operate like maelstroms that force their discursive environment to react in one way or another. As they grow and stabilise expectations of mutual nonacceptance and contradiction without any preference as to inducements and topics, Luhmann also uses the metaphor of "parasitical social systems" (Luhmann 1995: 390). To further comprehend their development, the Luhmannian concept of meaning, particularly the idea of meaning dimensions (Luhmann 1995: 74–82), will now be linked to the concept of conflict escalation.

Conflict systems: now in 3D!

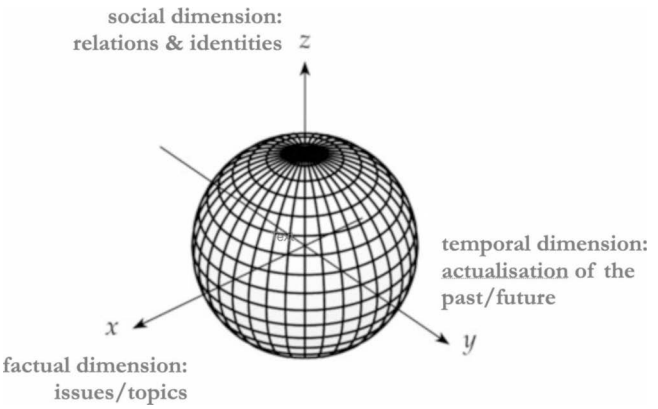
According to the basic considerations in systems theory mentioned above, conflict systems develop within other and between social systems.[16] In doing so, they increasingly claim and reframe communicative resources and attention of the 'hosting' systems for the sake of their self-preservation. This process can be comprehended according to three dimensions of meaning (see Figure "3D-Conflict-Model" below, own graphic according to Luhmann 1984: 112–122). Concerning its *factual dimension*, conflict escalation is characterised by an increasing number of issues and topics that are perceived and referred to as relevant to the conflict or, to put it another way, considered as 'conflict issues'. To give a brief example from the case study on the Maidan protests in Ukraine (see chapter 5): Initially, the emerging contradiction concentrated on the Ukrainian government's suspension to sign the Association Agreement with the EU and thus was limited to a specific foreign policy decision; towards the end of the investigation period, it included not only the topic of replacing the actual political leadership but also of calling the whole political elite and the political system as such into question.

In a *temporal dimension*, conflict systems, like any other social system, do not tend to end for no reason but to create new starting-points for connecting communication again and again. In the course of this, the chronological distinction between before and after tends to change. More precisely, the experiencing of the here and now of a conflict gets

16 Nota bene: Luhmann refers to three different kinds of systems: interactions systems, organisations, and function systems. Whereas interaction systems consist of communication among persons in presence, organisations as systems are characterised by communication on membership and decision-making. A myriad of interaction systems contribute to the continuation of function systems (e.g. customers paying in shops/economic subsystem, pleadings in court sessions/legal subsystem). Organisations (e.g. women's rights associations or car companies), use different forms of functional communication (e.g. making decisions to run a political campaign or dismissing employees, i.e. members, due to economic considerations). Function systems, in turn, produce all elements within themselves and comprise many but not necessarily all communication from interaction systems and organisations (see Albert 2019). In principle, conflict systems, too, could be analysed by taking interactions and organisations explicitly into account (see Sienknecht 2018: 77–78). However, in the present study, communication in the realm of function systems has priority. This is because of a twofold decision concerning this study's direction: First, a major part of the analysed communication comes from contexts of non-presence (except parts of communication referring to the use of violence during phases of conflict escalation). Second, the aspiration of being able to unbiasedly think of evolving conflict identities (resp. parties) should not be analytically confounded by a 'lens of organisation'.

selectively prolonged into the past and the future which means that communication actualises references, for example specific events or achievements, from the past or an expected future in the present ('actualisation'). Again looking at the Ukrainian case study, there is a number of statements linking the Maidan protests, both in positive and negative ways, to the Orange Revolution of 2004. In the same way, with reference to the experiences in the Soviet Union, the ongoing dispute about possible future scenarios (new east vs. old west orientation) gets talked up as a danger of Ukraine's breakup.

Figure 2: 3D Conflict Model



(Own graphic)

Finally, in its *social dimension*, conflict escalation represents an evolution that finds its expression in a changing way of marking the difference between ego and alter (see remarks on structures of expectation and identity in previous section). In short, triggered off by an initial contradiction, the relation between self and other(s) is characterised by a mutual attribution of identity features that become increasingly adversarial and antagonistic. In this sense, as the Ukrainian government refused to sign the Association Agreement with the EU, an unprecedented form of civil society engagement assumed shape and increasingly articulated itself, particularly by means of mass demonstrations, as a new political force confronting the government. However, relations between those observing themselves as political players quarrelling for the right way to go changed into a situation in which different sides see themselves as clearly defined parties to a conflict and label one another as "terrorists", "extremists", "subversives" and as "autocrats", "kleptocrats" or "idiots" (see case study chapters 5.5 and 6.5 for a differentiated view on identity layers, i.e. programmes, roles, persons, and norms).

Turning to the "3D Conflict Model" above, the variable sphere in the coordinate system represents an idealised depiction of a conflict system. Therefore, in the course of conflict escalation, the sphere is supposed to grow, i.e. to observe its environment (communication from any other social system) as either relevant to the conflict or not and thus to incorporate more and more communication in its factual, temporal or social dimen-

sion. In each observation, the attribution of meaning is realised according to these three dimensions (see Luhmann 1995: 86).

To sum up, from the present work's systems theoretical point of view, conflict escalation constitutes a process that has an inherent tendency to absorb more and more communicative resources of the host systems, i.e. a tendency "to bring all action into the context of an opposition within the perspective of an opposition" (Luhmann 1995: 390). Therefore, and this may indeed be the challenging part for some approaches in conflict studies, 'conflict parties' and 'conflict issues' do not precede a conflict; they do not exist per se. Instead, they are an 'instant' product of self-referential and hyper-integrative social systems. In this sense, conflicts have no corresponding reality 'outside' the conflict in terms of conditions and causes (see Weller 2005a; Bonacker 2007). Though, that is not to say that research on 'objective' factors and 'causes' of conflict always would not be analytically interesting and relevant. Of course, as is has been demonstrated in various empirical studies on armed conflict and war, absolute and relative power gains, economic motives, ethnic identities, individual interests etc. can be identified as highly significant features of conflict (see Daase 2003: 176–184). However, these features do not exist as such, they come into being via observation and communication and thus gain their specific meaning in a complex social process (see Weller 2014; 2020a). As could be derived from the systems theoretical understanding of communication introduced earlier, communication in itself has no built-in factual, temporal or social limits. This is all the more relevant when it comes to transcend the rather 'spatially-bound' both analytical and everyday understandings of conflict. At this point, the concept of world society literally opens new horizons.

3.2 Opening Horizons: A World Societal Framework

In the last three decades the intersection between IR as a traditional political science subdiscipline and sociology has gained more and more attention.[17] 'Sociology of IR' thus represents a progressive interdisciplinary field of research where both sides are interested in leaving behind disciplinary limitations. On the one hand, IR is in search of an adequate understanding of world politics that takes the 'socialisation' of international relations into account. On the other hand, sociology is struggling for concepts and theories that are able to grasp multifaceted debordering processes of still nationally imagined societies (and scientific disciplines) in a globalising world (see Stetter 2013). The meeting points between these approaches seem to be arranged around the topic of understanding order and change at a global scale as a very feature of the world level itself, instead of conceiving world politics from the perspective of the entities, i.e. container-like nation

17 For a comprehensive overview on the spectrum of approaches including reflections about opportunities and limits in this field see Albert et al. (2013), Stetter (2013), Albert and Mahlert (2017). See also the *British International Studies Association*'s (BISA) working group "Historical Sociology and International Relations" and the *German Association of Political Sciences*' (DVPW) working group "Sociology in IR". And finally, the rapprochement between IR and sociology represents one of the key topics of *International Political Sociology*.

states. Against this background, the claim would be to be able to approach classical issues of IR and (with certain reservations) sociology, for example power structures, cooperation, regional integration, and armed conflict/war as emerging qualities of a global societal context. Indeed, as examples in empirical conflict research show, armed conflict can be analytically captured by including manifold cross-border relations and networks in social, economic, and political domains.[18] It is thus suggested to perceive conflict development, parties and issues as being deeply embedded in a context which is, in principle, actually but at least potentially global. However, the overall empirical picture of armed conflict and war, sophistically represented in large databases (see examples in chapter 2), is still based on a more or less state-centered view of the world and thus does not seem to keep pace with portrayals of a dynamic globalisation.

Processes of social change in the course of globalisation are often characterised by an acceleration and intensification of cross-border activities and social relationships that are increasingly independent from the framework of the nation state and thus produce new political, economic and social demarcations perceived as being influential besides states (Held 2010). Especially since the end of the Cold War, based on an understanding of globalisation perceived as such, a number of IR-slogans have been produced that are in the meantime regarded as classic: globalisation comes with "debordering" (Brock and Albert 1995) or "denationalisation" (Zürn 1998) and the "global system" could best be described as a "post-Westphalian" one (Rosenau 1997) or as a "post-national constellation" (Habermas 2004). Recent research (see Holtgreve et al. 2021), in turn, argues to leave behind universalistic and potentially Eurocentric globalisation narratives on the one hand and to go beyond more or less statistically analysing transnational networks and connections with actual or potential global outreach in order to describe globalisation on the other hand. It is thus suggested to focus on how 'the global' is constructed and observed within concrete local practices: "[…] processes of globalization materialize in specific local acts, discourses and practices of observation" (Holtgreve et al. 2021: 17).[19] Since the time of the above-cited prominent IR-slogans, the need to develop concepts and theories beyond 'methodological nationalism' and to transcend disciplinary borders remained a recurring theme in IR.[20] Having said that, IR scholars rarely referred to a systems theoretical perspective of world society when thinking about innovative ways of conceptual-

18 For exemplarily overviews on this see Chojnacki (2008) and Francis (2009). With regard to the Malian case see e.g. the above-cited Lecocq et al. (2013).

19 As it will be outlined in the following, this is a suggestion that the present study has taken as a guideline on its own terms since its early stages. In this sense, violent conflicts represent materialisations (of globalisation processes) in "specific local acts, discourses and practices of observation".

20 On the one hand, empirical research often creates the impression that there are robust findings: the absolute number of armed and wars has been decreasing since the 1990s; a large majority of these violent conflicts are "intrastate" or "domestic" conflicts; these conflicts are, as a rule, persisting longer than interstate conflicts; finally, most of these protracted domestic conflicts are found "beyond the OECD-world" (Schlichte 2011). On the other hand, studies on "areas of limited statehood" and "transnational war economies" suggest that the traditional analytical stencils of IR (and PCS) have become less and less suitable to capture the changing picture of armed conflict and war in the world (see Schlichte 2011; Daase 2012).

ising violent conflict.[21] However, it has been discussed since the 1990s, when a reluctant examination of Luhmannian systems theory (of world society) in IR began.[22]

Returning to system theory's essentials elaborated above, communication is assumed to be de facto global in its actual and potential scope. Now, if the totality of communications able to reach each other constitutes society, there is no communication and thus no society outside world society (Stichweh 2000).[23] In his central essay on world society, Luhmann (2005[1975]) clarifies that the nation-state can only be considered congruent with the concept of society for a certain period in modern history. Accordingly, while insinuating the thesis of globalisation, society has obviously uncoupled from the framework of the nation state:

> "Let's begin with the question whether global interactions have consolidated. As a factual possibility, it is a historically new phenomenon. An Argentinian may marry an Abyssinian if he loves her. A Dane may take out a loan in New Zealand if it's economically advantageous. A Russian may trust in a technical construction that has been tested in Japan. A French author may seek for a homosexual relationship in Egypt. A Berliner may get tanned on the Bahamas if this conveys a feeling of recreation." (Luhmann 2005[1975]: 66).

In reference to Luhmann's second substantial finding, in modernity, world society is in principle characterised by the primacy of functional differentiation, even though other forms of differentiation (segmentation, stratification) can also be found in contemporary world society (Albert 2016: 62–63). Therefore, 'world economy', 'world law' or 'world politics' represent communicative subsystems of world society that operate and reproduce themselves autonomously. For instance, there is a world political system of nation states (segmentary mode) and, at the same time, a developing economic system that observes itself as a globalised world market (functional mode) (see Stichweh 2000: 7–30; Albert 2010: 57).[24] In other words, as world society dynamically develops, it can be stated that it shows different forms of *internal* differentiation simultaneously. The political subsystem

21 See particularly Stetter (2007), Albert (2007; 2008: 69), and Carlsneas et al. (2013).

22 See e.g. Brock & Albert (1995), Jung (1998), Bonacker & Weller (2006), Albert et al. (2010), Buzan & Albert (2010) or Stetter (2013). Exemplarily, see Albert and Stetter (2006: 60) who understand the theory of world society as an "IR-theory in the post-Westphalian era".

23 The systems theoretical understanding presented here is not to be confused with other schools of thought (in sociology and IR) that refer to the concept of world society. Therefore, thinking of world society in terms of a "global community" or an increasing convergence of global norms (see e.g. "Stanford School"; Meyer 2005) is not part of the present systems theoretical perspective. For comprehensive overviews on other approaches to world society see Bonacker and Weller (2006b) or Greve and Heintz (2005).

24 In this context, Waltz' *Theory of International Politics* (1979) provides some worthwhile counterpoints. Even though IR has rarely referred to the concept of differentiation, it indeed represents a central cornerstone in Waltz' neorealism. According to Waltz' conceptualisation of the "anarchical international system", there is no primacy of functional differentiation on the global level. Rather, the "international system" consists of similar political entities (states as "like-units") and thus follows the logic of segmentary differentiation. For Waltz, functional differentiation (i.e. the evolution of 'specialised' social subsystems like politics, economy or law) plays an important role in domestic affairs but not in international politics. In the latter, the distribution of power (capabilities)

of world society thereby exhibits some particularities, not to say some hybrid features. On the one hand, the contemporary formation of territorially defined nation states represents a form of segmentary differentiation.[25] On the other hand, in the fairway of globalisation, one can hardly deny that there are more and more forms of power and authority developing beyond (and increasingly independent from) the long-known structures of nation states, as for example the debate on 'regionalisation' or 'global governance' suggests (see van Langenhove and Scaramagli 2011; Dingwerth and Pattberg 2006).[26] Yet, as Albert and Mahlert (2017) pointed out, the still potent idea of a 'world of states' (and international relations among them) rather than being structurally underpinned at all times up to modern times "has its maybe most important manifestation on the level of semantics" (Albert and Mahlert 2017: 33; translation R.B.). It can be stated here that there are different modes of differentiation processing at the same time. According to Luhmann (2000: 220–227), this is to be understood as an essential feature of contemporary world society. As, for example, the volatile attribution of decision-making power to the EU relative to its member states shows, these modes of differentiation can compete with each other and thus be the starting point of contradiction.

World society, as introduced earlier, and other concepts in Luhmannian systems theory are often interpreted as contrary to the mindset of traditional IR, particularly because the role of territoriality and agency is marginalised (see Buzan and Albert 2010: 329). Also, even in sociology, systems theory à la Luhmann is often accused of being anti-empirical and having no suitable concept of actorness (see Vogd 2007). Nevertheless, drawing on Luhmann, the systems theoretical variant of world society theory provides a useful framework to empirically approach conflicts 'on the ground'. In this sense, differentiation represents one of the key processes that form the general characteristics of a conflict. To restate: In an internally differentiated world society specific subsystems (e.g. politics, economy, law and others) operate autonomously, on the basis of generalised media of communication (e.g. power, money, laws and jurisdiction).[27] As hinted at earlier, modes

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conditions whether a state belongs to the centre ('great powers') or to the periphery (i.e. less powerful states). Waltz thus describes elements of stratificatory differentiation on the global level.

25 The self-observation of the political system as a system of nation states found (and still finds) its pointed expression e.g. in the prominent "doctrine of the three elements", according to which a state is constituted by the unity of people, territory and authority (i.e. exercise of sovereign power) (see particularly Jellinek 1914: 394–434).

26 The insight that 'the political' exceeds the institutions of the nation state and its attributed roles (e.g. government, opposition etc.) can not only be found in systems theoretical considerations about world society. For example, within the framework of research on "global governance", there are comprehensive thoughts on a global civil society and its role in international politics (see e.g. Wapner 2008; Scholte 2016).

27 According to traditional understandings of politics, the political system is commonly attributed an exposed role (relative to other subsystems) since communication is processed by means of power, i.e. the ability to communicate in an enduring and binding manner and with a broad impact on the "big picture" (Albert and Steinmetz 2007: 20–21). Thereby, politics is represented as a *primus inter pares* that has an overall steering function relating to all subsystems. For Luhmann, this kind of thinking is an expression of an "excessive steering mania" while, in fact, self-referential social systems cannot be steered but operate autonomously and can at best be irritated by other systems (see Simsa 2002: 166–168; Albert 2019).

of differentiation within or between subsystems can be in a certain competition that gets actualised within communication. Coming from the deductive side of research, settings in which these "fault lines" between differentiation modes (Albert 2010: 57) come into play represent discursive arenas where contradictions are expected to arise.[28]

Evidently, this insight has substantial conflict theoretical repercussions (see e.g. Albert 2008: 63–69) that this study follows up on. Coming from the inductive side of research, in anticipation of the case studies, the context of the Maidan protests (chapter 5) serves as an illustration at this point: an ultimate form of 'powerful' political communication, for example the deployment of security forces in order to contain mass demonstrations based on a sovereign state's monopoly on violence can stand in contrast to legal communication, for example concerning references to the obligations under national and international law relating to the principle of proportionality, freedom of expression as well as other civil and political rights.[29] Also, considerations within the realm of law, e.g. concerning the protection of natural and cultural environments can be contrary to economic communication that, for example, evaluates the extraction of natural resources according to demand and supply on a global market (see 'rare earths' and the Malian conflict; chapter 6). As can be retained from these brief illustrations, world society's subsystems are characterised by a striking incongruence inasmuch as their communicative outreach shows widely different frames of reference. This is where the very basic potential for contradiction and thus for conflict escalation lies.

To further illustrate these general characteristics of a conflict in world society, this section continues by elaborating on a selection of exemplary observations taken from the Malian case study (see chapter 6). At first glance, according to various reports, the 'conflict in Northern Mali' or the 'Malian civil war' has been commonly labelled as an 'intrastate conflict'. In this vein, it was either interpreted as ethnically (black Africans vs. white Tuaregs/Arabs), religiously (liberal Islamic/secular society vs. conservative Muslim orientation), economically (access to/control of natural resources and Sahelian shadow economy in the north) or strategically/politically driven (decades-long struggle for Tuareg self-determination vs. survival of the multi-ethnic Malian nation state). However, assessing the Malian situation in 2011/2012 as a looming "domestic" conflict (Cline 2013;

28 Against this background, research addressed that what is expected to be an empirical product of fault lines of differentiation in terms of *inclusion and exclusion* (of persons) from different social subsystems. In this context, Sienknecht (2018: 75, 85–93) develops an approach that places "exclusions from central social sectors […] as conflict causes" centre stage. Even though there are some parallels in approaching conflict as social systems in a systems theoretical way (see Sienknecht 2018: 75–84, Bösch 2014, 2015), the present study attaches great importance to rather strengthen an inductive approach in revealing differentiation processes 'on the ground' (without a priori and exclusively stating the 'exclusion hypothesis').

29 As opposed to this case study example, one can hypothetically imagine an absolute estates-based society, in which all communication is strictly ordered along stratificatory differentiation (see e.g. medieval European societies). Indeed, even in such a society a certain system of law would exist. However, it would not operate as autonomously as e.g. the contemporary global legal system (inter alia expressed by a global human rights regime). Therefore, it would not pose an increased potential for contradictions since it would not offer alternative views competing with power-based communication.

Hainzl 2013) would fall short against the background of a myriad of cross-border relations, which evidently played a role as well. Referring to Lecocq et al. (2013: 344–348), a comprehensive conflict analysis that truly takes multiperspectivity into account would also have to consider the transnational dimension, including aspects like:

- the transnational distribution of ethnic communities (such as the Tuareg in Mali, Niger, Algeria, Burkina Faso, Mauretania) maintaining their own ideas of tribal identity, nomadism and nationality;
- the exodus of thousands of Malian origins who left Libya for Mali after the fall of Gaddafi regime in summer 2011;
- the different perfomances of the northern regions compared to the south concerning the overall development, particularly against the background of an unbalanced/unsuccessful spending of (international) public and private funds;
- transnational economic interests defining 'security' in terms of rising and falling transaction costs for certain scarce commodities (nota bene: French and multinational companies were granted extensive concessions to exploit natural resources in the north, especially uranium and other rare earths);
- the Azawadians' continuous appeals to international law and the international community concerning the right to self-determination as a people;
- transnational terrorist networks trying to extend their sphere of influence in the Sahel (both by promoting an Islamist statebuilding project and by controlling narcotraffic and the 'kidnapping-business' in the Sahel).

Of course, this brief listing does not in itself point to a comprehensive systems theoretical 'explanation' of conflict escalation in the Malian case. Rather, it serves as an exemplification of how competing modes of differentiation in world society can take form and, thereby, provide discursive reservoirs for contradiction and thus conflict communication. However, without claiming to be exhaustive, the above listed considerations and hypotheses are basically deduced from other conflict analytical work. To adopt a more comprehensive perspective on conflict (escalation), it is hence indispensable to find out what shows up as being relevant in the eyes of involved observers and thus to pursue an inductive approach. As Chapter 4 expounds in detail, this study provides an approach to view conflicts in a different light. By tapping documented communication as empirical sources, it elaborates a way to comprehend conflicts as discursive arenas in world society.[30]

30 As it will be explicated in chapter 4, a 'document' is broadly understood as any form of 'recorded' (linguistic, symbolic) communication (e.g. texts, pictures, art works, songs etc.). In a narrower sense, the term will be used for written texts, i.e. fixed linguistic communication.

3.3 A Systems Theoretical World Society Perspective: What's in it for Conflict Studies?

As notified earlier, the present study is dedicated to developing an approach to the analysis of conflict escalation that enables researchers to consider, in principle, a conflict's overall discursive performance. For this purpose, it argues in favour of a decidedly inductive approach that is based on the systematic analysis of conflict communication on the basis of 'documents' (for methodical details see chapter 4). Having said this in advance, such an empirically oriented approach can certainly not be devised and implemented out of a theoretical vacuum. As far as the present work is concerned, it is embedded in a very elementary systems theoretical worldview that undergirds its proceeding.

According to the key systems theoretical concepts (observation, communication, social system) elaborated above and bearing the ontological and epistemological considerations related to the linguistic/communicative turn in mind, conflicts here are conceptualised as social systems in their own right:

> "Conflict systems are thus understood as 'capturing' social systems, i.e. evolving discursive spaces where contradiction from different social subsystems gets structurally interlinked and stabilised over time." (Bösch 2017)

Taking the systems theoretical world society perspective into consideration, the present study basically rests upon two assumptions: Firstly, it is argued that communication constitutes the basic unit of all social structures, including conflicts. Secondly, conflicts are understood as being closely linked to the overall process of differentiation in world society: conflicts with a high potential of escalation particularly occur when varying patterns of differentiation accumulate.

Against this background, this study's idea of analysing conflict escalation represents an impartial and far-reaching approach that concretely opens up the empirical horizon of conflict studies. Instead of including and assessing conflict related phenomena exclusively based on alleged 'actorness' behind, this approach focuses on a conflict's discursive 'making-of' within linguistic communication which permits to draw on all kinds of (text) sources. Therefore, it enables its users to reconstruct the very process of a conflict's intensification which is often put aside as a 'black box' and thus represents a latent desideratum in conflict studies so far (see chapter 2.4). In this context, within the framework of this approach, tracing the process of emerging and increasingly opposing conflict identities plays a crucial role. As it will be demonstrated by the help of the case studies in this contribution, processes of differentiation (as a key feature of a dynamic evolution of world society) are constructed via and can be observed in conflict practices. Freely adapted from Holtgreve et al. (2021; see above), one might also say that competing modes of differentiation materialise in "specific local acts, discourses and practices of observation" that altogether form a conflict system. Now, chapter 4 turns to the question of how this systems theoretical and world societal perspective can be 'translated' into a concrete empirical research programme.