Chapter 8. Concluding Remarks

> "The observer – in drawing a distinction – makes himself visible to others. He betrays his presence – even if a further distinction is required to distinguish him."
> *(Luhmann 2000b: 54)*

8.1 How do conflicts escalate?

Fully prepared to deliberately 'betray his presence', this author, in this very last chapters, intends to pay back his coin and, based on the distinctions and indications showing up in this study, offers an answer to this research question, which rates among the major and overarching questions in conflict research. Further 'distinctions' in any sense of the word may be required.

This study followed a tripartite agenda to answer the research question: First, it developed an empirical research strategy including a constructivist methodology for the study of conflict escalation. This strategy is embedded in a Luhmannian systems theoretical world society perspective. Taking up this perspective, it was a key ambition to visualise how conflicts develop within the shades and patterns of differentiation in world society. Reflecting the approach of Holtgreve et al. (2021), the present work shows that competing modes of differentiation at different speeds and qualities can be observed in specific 'local' discourses and practices of observation, more precisely, in form of conflict systems understood as social systems in their own right. To empirically investigate the development of conflict systems and discursive representations of their 'world societal footprint' in a process perspective, the study presented a reconstructive approach informed by grounded theory and the documentary method (see chapter 4.3). By means of a systematic analysis of communication, the conflict discourse's development over time could be mapped. Thereby, a special focus rested on how the conflict system processed the difference between the inside and the outside, which, of course, changes during the course of conflict escalation (i.e. concerning issues, positions, identities). Both the working definition,

> "capturing social system, i.e. an evolving discursive space where contradicting communication from various social subsystems gets structurally coupled and stabilised" (see also Bösch 2017),

and a number of metaphors (as e.g. the 'maelstrom' urging its discursive environment to take a stance) served to make the concept of conflict systems and their scientific observation transparent and accessible and to lay the ground to conduct comprehensible plausibility probes.

Second, against this theoretical background, the concrete plausibility check of the empirical research strategy was performed by two case studies that analysed two processes of conflict escalation prior to armed conflict (Maidan protests/Ukraine 2013–2014; Mali's crisis 2010–2012). As presented in chapter 5, the Maidan protests from late November 2013 to February 2014 developed from a peacefully expressed contestation of a foreign policy decision (not to sign the Association Agreement with the EU) into a situation where the legitimate use of force is claimed by different sides and degrading the other (being either anti-government/"Europhile" or pro-government/"Russophile") had become a widespread phenomenon. Now, based on the systematic analysis of the text corpus, i.e. a compilation of observations referring to 'the conflict', it can be stated that the development of conflict escalation shows a few milestones. The identification of escalating moves reveals how the conflict steadily grows through new contradictions that are produced when aspects of political, economic, legal, and medial communication encounter and couple, as to, for example: the role of civil society as a political force; the pros and cons of economic integration; the poles of international law and national sovereignty; change in the global balance of power; the political role of the media (see chapter 5.6). Chapter 6 addresses the antecedent of the armed conflict in Mali from October 2010 to February 2012. This case study, too, traces the development of a situation that is, at the beginning of the investigation period, observed as a peaceful articulation of a political programme but then successively evolves into a conflict in which the use of force had become a generalised and legitimate means to achieve or defend democracy. Likewise, based on what the analysis of the text corpus revealed, conflict escalation can be structured according to escalating moves showing up in the conflict discourse. Here, too, the accumulation and chaining of contradictions shows up in encountering and coupling aspects of political, religious, legal and economic communication, as to: the perception of political power according to a global model of centre and periphery; the poles between religiously, ethnically and politically imagined society; economic interests played out in a (world) market; the interplay between international recognition and national sovereignty (see chapter 6.6). In sum, it can be stated for both case studies, in the course of escalating moves (i.e. structural couplings and normative shifts) of the discourse, the attribution of features to conflict identities gets accelerated and intensified towards mutually exclusive conflict identities. Against the background of this synergy the perception of that what is referred to as legitimate use of force changes.[1]

1 Since the case studies were conducted within the framework of plausibility probes, there is certainly much room left in view of approaching these (and other) cases by means of other types of case studies, for example by including comparative designs. Following the documentary method,

Third, and thus the last point of this study's tripartite agenda: After having recapitulated some of the case study results (chapter 7.1) and reflected issues of methodology (chapter 7.2), this very last chapter intends to extract some impulses and ideas from the systems theoretical research outlined here that can further on be beneficial, for example within the context of PCS. Now, although the present project came along with fairly concrete plausibility probes including deep diving into empirical material, this endeavour cannot be thought of as one that is done by opening up an actual state-of-the-art in conflict studies or neighbouring disciplines; identifying gaps between theoretical building blocks; hinting at missing empirical tools; and, finally, making clear how the present approach may or may not be 'connectable' or helpful in treating a whole number of desiderata. Rather, this is about highlighting an additional value on a 'meta level', by providing impulses for the reflection of scientifically observing conflicts in world society. Against this background, the double meaning of title should once again be emphasised:

Observing Conflict Escalation in World Society

On the one hand, the title points to the aspect that readers, by the approach developed here, are offered to observe how conflict escalation in world society was observed within the two case study contexts presented (analysing observing *in* conflicts). On the other hand, having this contribution at hand, readers may take this as an example of how conflict escalation in world society can be scientifically observed (analysing observing *of* conflicts).

So, what are the beneficial implications, for example for PCS, of this 'double approach' which is ultimately only based on the analysis of communication, observes conflict escalation as development of a capturing social system, as a communicative maelstrom, as an evolving discursive space, as a cascade of communicative events or as a succession of escalating moves (structural couplings and normative shifts) of a conflict discourse? To offer an answer to this question, the following chapter will now highlight some connections to the field of PCS.

8.2 Some Implications for Peace and Conflict Studies

Taking a prominent voice in the field as an example, PCS is attributed the following orientation and, based on that, area of practical work (DSF 2013; cited in introducing chapter 4):

> "Peace and Conflict Studies shall generate research-based knowledge about the conditions contributing to the escalation of social conflicts into violence and about the possibilities and means to prevent such dynamics with peaceful measures."

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which informed significant parts of the empirical research strategy in this study, the next step would be to continue this work by performing comparative analyses aiming at systematically relating contexts within the existing case studies, generating typologies, doing new case studies and thus bringing new case contrasts in (see e.g. Vogd 2010: 126).

This quotation expresses a quite ambitious attitude on that what PCS should be able to contribute with a view to conflict escalation. At this point, it thus defies this author to explicitly address the above-mentioned impulses that may inspire the observation of conflict in world society from a scientific point of view. In the following sections, these impulses are linked to considerations on reflexive conflict analysis in peace research (see particularly Weller 2017).

As quoted at the very beginning of this contribution, stating that there are "sets of assumptions behind every analysis of violent conflict" is a very obvious thing to do. What implications follow from this assessment, form the "lack of grounded and critical analysis of violence and war" and, as a consequence thereof, from "misleading and inaccurate strategies and interventions" (Demmers 2012: 1)? And to what extent does a 'reflexive turn' in conflict research advance answers to these questions and, at the same time, helps to elaborate on evident desiderata in conflict analysis, such as the underrepresentation of pre-violent conflict escalation phases (see chapter 2.4)? In this context, according to Weller (2017: 177–178) conflict research particularly faces three challenges when engaging in empirically analysing (and resp. intervening in) concrete conflicts: (1) Conflict analysis takes side, at least implicitly, for a "civilising" conflict management; (2) conflict analysis may have consequences for the course of conflict; and (3) conflict analysis may often be irritated by different or even opposing perspectives and 'truths' about conflict emerging from the information available. Implications for PCS from the present work are now substantiated with reference to these challenges:

(1) Scientific conflict analyses can often have an implicit preference for a kind of "civilising conflict management" (Gulowski and Weller 2017) which is, in the political and scientific discourse, frequently also linked to the expectation of implementing 'non-violent' strategies. Apart from further inquiries that a suchlike normative orientation[2] in the (self-)observation of researchers may involve as to their understanding of roles in conflict (see Weller 2017: 177), a further aspect seems to be crucial from this work's standpoint: To understand violent in conflict, it could be expedient to look out for what is observed and articulated as (il)legitimate violence in specific conflict settings. A systematic analysis of communication in developing emerging conflict discourse, just as presented in the case studies, thus provides an orientation about how discursive representations of violence change over time. The case study on the Maidan protests is a striking example: Whereas in phase I, the use of force (i.e. physical violence against protesters and security forces, but also violence against material things) was observed as an extremely restricted phenomenon (politically, legally) and almost a social taboo, in phase IV, the observation drastically changed to understanding the use of force as a generalised everybody's resource (see chapter 5.6). According to Jabri (1996: 1) PCS "must incorporate the discursive and institutional continuities which render violent conflict a legitimate and widely accepted mode of human conduct". This is what the 'analysing of observations (of violence) *in* conflict' perspective of this work can train for.

2 Another substantial part of PCS's normative orientation can certainly be found in its positive understanding of conflicts highlighting their socialising effects (see Gulowski and Weller 2017: 404; see also chapter 2.1).

(2) Concrete scientific conflict analyses, once labelled and published as such, may have consequences in the further course of the conflict. This can already be seen as part of an intervention (see Weller 2017: 177; see also 2014: 23). In other words, the very fact that a researcher produces a conflict analysis and articulates this publicly documents another successful dragging in by the 'maelstrom of conflict' (see chapter 4.2 on "Researchers select cases or cases select researchers?"). No matter how looked at, conflict analyses do represent (scientific) communication that observes a conflict discourse and thus becomes part of the conflict system. Yet, observing and earmarking a social interaction as a 'conflict' may be controversial or even not relevant among participants; labelling the observed interaction as such can thus literally let a conflict emerge (see chapter 7.2/(5) 'Café scene'). Also, observations of conflict by mass media (see Weller 2014: 20–21) or by "transnational observers" (Beck and Werron 2013) who write reports and thus attract attention may even trigger the use of violence in conflict (see also chapter 4.3). Now, again, what follows form this in the light of the present contribution?

Coming from the 'analysing observations *of* conflict' perspective of this study and taking the possible consequences of (scientific) conflict observation into account, the question of the extent to which this work might offer an additional 'practical' value to civilian conflict management (and other much-cited concepts in the field, such as "conflict transformation" or "conflict resolution" see chapter 2.3) now gets in the focus of attention. If conflicts correspond to 'capturing social systems' swallowing up their communicative environment, then the intuitive impulse of the present approach would be to ask for a kind of 'stop mechanism'. In other words, how would intervening communication (resp. an "intervening system"; see Albert 2008: 69) have to be knitted in order to inhibit the conflict discourse from carrying out escalating moves that come along, for example, with mutually exclusive conflict identities? Now, without overrating the capacity to steer of certain systems towards others (see Simsa 2002: 166–168; see also chapter 3.2), a suchlike communication would have to understand conflict management as an approach that, first and foremost, recognises working on the conflict as a task in which researchers and other participants are commonly involved (see Gulwoski and Weller 2017: 405); would be able to set impulses to make confronting constructions of reality, such as entrenching conflict identities, more flexible by introducing other perspectives and possible distinctions (see Troja 2013: 152); would prevent the legitimisation and normalisation of physical violence as a form of communication; would 'immunise' other social systems in order to observe conflicts as means of positive social change that can be achieved without using and legitimising (physical) violence in conflict discourses; would provide incentives to work on disappointed expectations and to collective learning (see Troja 2013: 154–155); would facilitate the formation of institutions of conflict management (see Gulowski and Weller 2017: 406); and, finally, would might be thought of as organised within the concept of "participatory conflict research" (Weller 2020b), aiming at creating frameworks in which collective conflict observation (in the form of conflict management) can be explicitly shared among scientific and other observers of conflict (participants/'conflict parties').

(3) Scientific conflict analysis may often be irritated by different or even opposing perspectives and 'truths' about conflict emerging from the information available (see Weller 2017: 177–178). From the perspective of the present study, this challenge once again offers

an opportunity to point to the revolutionary character of the 'communicative turn'. *It's communication that holds the world together.* Indeed, placing communication in the centre of empirical research changes a lot. Most obviously, it helps to free oneself from essentialising 'actors' and from naturalising specific levels of analysis. This fundamental attitude, as demonstrated in the present study, can then be translated into an open methodology that allows research to observe itself as an exploration process in which zooming through communication has its place (e.g. during case selection, data gathering, coding etc.). Also, a suchlike approach makes it easier to stay teetotal towards attributing rational and goal-oriented motives at any given opportunity (although this could require a great amount of discipline; see (1) in chapter 7.2) or, for example, to appreciate certain text genres that may be included in a text corpus, such as 'propaganda', as what they are: discursive representations of conflict in communication. In this sense and without any intention to sound pretentious, this study invites scientific and other observers to see and consider *more* of a conflict than just the most obvious 'truths' referring to conflict.

Finally, again coming back to the 'analysing observations *of* conflict' perspective, the lenses offered here do also encourage to look at some blind spots of observation in conflict research. As Gulowski and Weller (2017: 391) pointed out, for example, civilian conflict management has a certain built-in orientation towards non-Western conflict situations that are observed to be in need of conflict management whereas conflicts in the global north are rarely approached with this attitude. In this sense, scientific observations from postcolonial research were a key impulse to reflect distinctions and indications behind the self-attributed role of those intervening for the sake of violence prevention and those observing themselves as objects to intervention that may not have been necessary at all.

In sum, these brief considerations are intended to open up avenues for empirical research on conflicts in world society inspired by systems theory within the interdisciplinary field of PCS. Beyond that, the approach of the present study does also invite readers from diverse (scientific) backgrounds to play with the following thought that may seem a bit sentimental at this point: If communication is global in its actual and potential scope and if the totality of communications able to reach each other constitutes society, then there is no communication and thus no society outside world society. In other words, our observations (of conflict), both in the systems theoretical and the everyday sense of the expression, *make a difference*. We are all in!

8.3 A Snapshot of Critical (Self-)Observation

In a last effort to carry out this study in a reflexive way, the time has come to bring forward a fundamental critique touching the major foundation of this study, of Luhmannian systems theory. In doing so, the critical impetus of a systems theoretical approach, "visibilising the invisibilised", as pointedly framed by Amstutz and Fischer-Lescano (2013: 9), gets turned on itself:

> "Dualism fails to recognize that reality consists of intermediate degrees, flexible borders, and ever-changing vistas. It is a socially constructed belief system that nonethe-

> less remains the bedrock upon which much human social reality is grounded." (Del Collins 2005: 264)

Now, the question that obviously arises: Is there a deeply rooted dualism in Luhmannian systems theory that has notable and potentially negative consequences limiting systems theoretical approaches to look at the world? Indeed, Luhmann's world is a binary world in which a basic distinction between marked and unmarked space is permanently reified (see Brown 1972; Luhmann 1995: 166–167). Based on that, any observation processes in the same way. In this sense, Luhmannian systems theory is obviously steeped in binary thinking, thus leaving little space for the 'in-between'. Nevertheless, since an observer cannot be part of the phenomenon observed, it does indeed reflect on the 'blind spots' that are inherent to any observation. So, at least, there is a kind of built-in incentive of reflection. But what is the problem with this inherent dualism in the first place? At this point, one might recall an argument from postcolonial thinking:

> "The problem with such binary systems is that they suppress ambiguous or interstitial spaces between the opposed categories, so that any overlapping region that may appear, say, between the categories man/woman, child/adult or friend/alien, becomes impossible according to binary logic, and a region of taboo in social experience." (Ashcroft et al. 2007: 18)

Of course, one could argue that the problem with binary systems presented above refers to a different 'level' than the metatheoretical dualism in Luhmann's work. Still, the question remains open whether it is exactly this fundamental idea of a (social) world made up of binary codings that ultimately declines itself throughout the landscape of theories and concepts, in conflict studies, too.

Thus, it could be envisaged to think about conditions under which Luhmannian systems theory, based on its (self-)observing impetus, would be able to transcend dualistic thinking in order to advance thinking beyond the either/or, to realise the role metatheoretical dualism maybe plays in creating conflict and to become familiar with dynamical systems of interpretation (see Del Collins 2005: 278). But would it still be Luhmannian systems theory then? To be continued…