

## Coordination by De-Integration in Pandemic Times

The present condition of social isolation makes most of us aware of the value of sociality - that we lack. But society is not only sociality, as we realize precisely when we must minimize physical social contacts. In the emergency we perceive society much stronger because of a condition that appears as a global threat and seems to change everything everywhere. “There is the world B.C. - Before Corona - and the world A.C. - After Corona” (Friedman 2020). The risk affects the entire world, from Hubei to Italy to New York to Rwanda, all sectors of society and each of us. The virus is a threat to people's lives, but also to the stability of institutions, the soundness of finance, interpersonal relations, democracy, the maintenance of jobs, international links and many other things. In this short note, I refer to society in this global sense and analyze the coronavirus emergency with the tools of Niklas Luhmann's sociological systems theory – primarily because it is a theory of society, and there are not many nowadays.

In the pandemic, society is perceived first of all as global interconnectedness that produces a domino effect and makes the crisis spread from one geographical area to another and between the different fields of society. In an emergency, the high interconnection of society becomes a threat. Coordination is required between different countries and also between political, economic, legal, sanitary measures to face the emergency. The most common response is to demand “tightening-up” (e.g. Gelfand 2020). If everything is connected with everything else, one claims, interventions in different areas should be coordinated according to the same approach and the same basic principles. Only in this way, one argues, can interventions be effective and avoid hindering each other. By going all in the same direction one does not get in each other's way, reinforces each other and proceeds more quickly and effectively.

The classical notion that sociology proposes to study the interconnection of society is the concept of *integration*. The notion refers to what holds society together and addresses the relationship of the parts to the whole. Usually integration is interpreted in a general sense as reference to a shared unity, to a common perspective one recognizes and in which one can identify herself. Classical sociologists like Durkheim (1893) and Parsons (1977: 283 f.) use the notion of integration to deal with a widespread sense of belonging connecting different parts of society, which should be preserved. Societies, that's the idea, should be as integrated as possible, avoiding risks of anomy and coordination difficulties – especially in challenging times as the present emergency.

The principle seems plausible, but putting it into practice in a complex society is not easy. Integration in this sense is threatened by the increasing differentiation of society, starting with the division of labor. The challenge is maintaining a shared feeling of belonging not when everybody is equal and does the same things, but when everybody is different and does different things. The main obstacle is the condition that system theory calls *functional differentiation*, considered the basic characteristic of modern society (Luhmann 1997: 743 ff.). Functional differentiation refers to the articulation of society into different areas (or functional subsystems), each directed to a specific function: economy, politics,

law, science, education, art, religion, mass media, families, healthcare. Whereas in previous hierarchically organized societies the different fields shared the same basic principles, in modern society each subsystem is guided by its own logic and criteria, which are not necessarily coordinated with those of others and cannot be traced back to a single order. The programs and priorities of the economy are different from those of science, politics, religion and any other subsystem - and success in one system does not by itself translate into a positive result in a different one. While the economy is driven by profit maximization, politics seeks consensus, research is directed towards the production of scientific truths and healthcare towards patients' recovery.

Yet the pandemic today threatens everything - health and wealth, church and commerce, law, sport and families. Differentiation, which leads to different responses in different areas, in the face of this challenge seems to prevent coordination. Medicine needs tests to see who has the virus and must stay in isolation - while the economy requires tests to see who has the antibodies and can go to work. Restricting people's freedom and tracing their movements is effective in countering the spread of the virus, but goes against the principles of the rule of law and the guarantees of the constitution. Reducing taxes can help companies overcome the crisis, but taxes are required to support research and equipment for hospitals. Science needs time to develop and test treatments, yet politics is in a hurry to give immediate answers (Gopnik 2020).

Can our society still be integrated under these conditions? Responding to this challenge, Luhmann deviates from the classical sociological approach and describes integration not as reference to unity but as disturbance. In his definition, integration is "a reduction of degrees of freedom" due to belonging to society (1997: 603). The problem of functionally differentiated society is not lack of integration but rather too much integration in the mutual relationships of the subsystems, which can be very dangerous.

In this understanding, integration does not mean unity but mutual constraints: "It lies not in the relationship of the 'parts' to the 'whole', but in the movable, even historically movable, adjustment of the subsystems in relation to each other" (Luhmann 1997: 604). Integration does not imply sharing the same orientation but acknowledging the reciprocal existence. Every system must give up possibilities: for example, science never has all the money it needs and not all promising research is permitted by law or religion; politics is bound by the constitution, by budgetary limits and by media observation. These limitations, however, are necessary to continue to operate in the society to which the systems belong. In this sense, integration in itself is neither positive nor negative - it is a fact in the existence of a complex society with partial systems. Increase in integration is not necessarily an advantage and cannot be the goal - it does not mean by itself an increase in coordination, but primarily an increase in constraints.

The problem of a complex society is not lack of integration but rather the ability to ensure sufficient de-integration - sufficient reciprocal indifference (Luhmann 1997: 183). De-integration opposes the reduction in degrees of freedom imposed by the adjustment to each other, i.e. by integration. Differentiation does not imply de-integration in this sense, rather the opposite: "Modern society is over-integrated and therefore endangered" (Luhmann 1997: 618) precisely as a consequence of functional differentiation. The increasing autonomy of the different areas of society does not mean that functional

systems do not care for one another - quite the contrary. Every system carries out its operations according to its own criteria, but precisely therefore needs the other functions of society to be fulfilled by other systems that follow a different logic and different criteria, and has to make this possible. Functional differentiation involves a “simultaneous increase of mutual dependencies and independencies” (Luhmann 1997: 763).

Each subsystem needs the necessary functions to be guaranteed and depends on the functioning of the other systems, and all proceed autonomously. When things go well, this close mutual dependence on the autonomies of others goes unnoticed, but it stands out when there are problems, as is typically the case in emergencies. If there is a high failure rate in one system, all others are forced to make serious adjustments (Luhmann 1997: 769). The troubled subsystem affects all others in a sort of call to arms in which paradoxically the central position is not occupied by the system that works better and is stronger - but just the opposite. Reciprocal indifference, i.e. de-integration, becomes difficult.

When there is an emergency, all functional systems are overwhelmed by a domino effect, as we observe today. In the space of a few weeks, the coronavirus has overloaded hospitals, generating an emergency in the health care system that rapidly dominated society as a whole. The government has to deal with it, the economy is in trouble, schools are closed, interpersonal relationships are blocked, no more mass, sports competitions and concerts are suspended, emergency laws are laid down. There is a strong reciprocal reduction in degrees of freedom, which is difficult to curb and to govern - an excess of systemic integration so that the shortcomings of one area are immediately reflected in what can be done (or cannot be done) in every other one. This is the problem that our society is facing in the coronavirus crisis.

All sectors of society are mobilized to manage the crisis, but a general confluence of resources in the endangered sector is not the solution, because the area that triggers the emergency cannot directly use the operations of others. Neither political decisions nor money nor love of families by themselves heal the patients - the cure must be provided by the healthcare system with its resources. The other subsystems should go on performing with the greatest possible efficiency compatible with the emergency, because money, regulation, interpersonal relations, research, as well as entertainment, religious comfort and artistic experiences are still (even more) needed - but the responses in each area have different consequences in all others.

Functional differentiation, however, also increases resilience (Luhmann 1997: 133). If the functional subsystems have sufficient degrees of freedom, they can develop a variety of reactions. Alongside the inevitable systemic integration spreading a problem in all subsystems and limiting their possibilities, in a functionally differentiated society there can also be a de-integration of reactions, so that each system can generate its own solutions different from every other one. The opportunities for rationality of society in dealing with problems that come from the environment, argues Luhmann (1997: 185), lie “in the maintenance and exploitation of differences, not in their elimination”. Functional differentiation accentuates coordination problems but also the variety of responses – i.e. de-integration.

The Coronavirus emergency, that puts society under a pressure to integration unprecedented for many decades, also allows for sufficient reciprocal indifference to produce diverse responses. The emergency has repercussions in all fields and integration is inevitable. Every system has to deal with the same issue at the same time. The medical need to limit the movement of people has political, legal, family, media, etc. relevance and affects all areas of society. All systems converge on the same problem, greatly restricting the degrees of freedom of each of them. Whatever the priorities and programs of the various areas, in the general mobilization they all constrain each other. Even if they deal with the same event, however, the systems are not bound to do the same thing and do not stick to each other. In every area of society the meaning of the event is different. The constraints to people's movements provoke in politics a discussion about public order measures, the economy activates home working, finance speculates, the legal system debates about the legitimacy of the limits to the freedom of individuals, the mass media plan their palimpsest to take into account the new time availability of users, schools and universities change the organization of teaching, family members spend much more time together. The system that requires the constraint (healthcare) cannot predict what consequences it will have in other areas, but neither can it determine what others will do with it. "In the pulsation of events the systems integrate and de-integrate from moment to moment" (Luhmann 1997: 605).

The rationality of coordination is strengthened not by increasing bonds, i.e. integration, but by fostering the diversity of reactions to the same problem - i.e. de-integration and reciprocal indifference. The different systems that must react to the same event, independently determine the consequences of the irritation and learn differently. The companies that have to pay their employees to stay at home, if they do not close, activate new relationships with workers and innovate their structures. Politics absorbed by emergency management restructures the relationship between government and opposition (reducing polarization or introducing authoritarian forms like Orban's Hungary). Mass media that must avoid people getting bored develop new formats (e.g. webcam interviews on Skype or Face Time, or shows on Instagram Snapchat Stories that disappear after 24 hours). In schools forced to give up interaction in class, the computer literacy of students and teachers increases and new forms of teaching are tested. Scientific researchers cannot access labs and attend conferences - but under the pressure of the emergency new online forms of dissemination of information emerge (such as the Covid-19 Open Research Dataset) as well as innovative experiments using A.I. to explore big corpora of research papers (Markoff 2020). Churches are empty, but for the first time the pope grants the plenary indulgence to all believers (in Pope Francis' prayer on 27 March 2020). Families find themselves and in some cases restructure (several Chinese provinces reported a record-high number of divorce requests in the weeks following the emergency quarantines).

No unitary logic underlies this variety of responses. The coordination, if there is any, does not rely on shared goals or common principles, but rather on the possibility for each system to rely on the contribution of the others and do something different.

## References

- Durkheim, Émile 1893. *De la division du travail social*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 7. Ed. 1960.
- Friedman, Thomas L. 2020. Our New Historical Divide: B.C. and A.C. — the World Before Corona and the World After. *The New York Times*, March 17.
- Gelfand, Michele 2020. To survive the coronavirus, the United States must tighten up. *The Boston Globe*, March 13.
- Gopnik, Adam 2020. The Coronavirus and the Importance of Giving Science the Time it Needs. *The New Yorker*, March 25.
- Luhmann, Niklas 1997. *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.
- Markoff, John 2020. You Can't Spell Creative Without A.I. *The New York Times*, April 8.
- Parsons, Talcott 1977. *Social Systems and the Evolution of Action Theory*. New York: Free Press.