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**THE PARADOX OF DIFFERENTIATION: NIKLAS LUHMANN'S
SOCIAL SYSTEMS THEORY AND THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF
UNILATERAL CONTROL – THE CASE OF APARTHEID**

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A minor dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award
of the degree of Master of Social Science

Faculty of the Humanities

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Abstract

The German sociologist, Niklas Luhmann, proposed a social theory that could describe a society at a far more abstract level than is customary. Based on his study of general systems theory and drawing on the works of biologists and mathematicians, Luhmann formulated his theory of social systems which he hoped would move social theory away from the discourse of oppression. In developing his theory, one of the conclusions he arrived at was that unilateral control (or domination) was impossible as a permanent feature of a system. This paper demonstrates (a) how such unilateral control cannot be a defining structure of a society although it appears temporarily from time to time and (b) how Luhmann's social systems theory provides a theoretical framework to understand the impossibility of unilateral control. By using Luhmann's theory of differentiation, this paper will show how the unique evolution of the Apartheid subsystem led to the temporary success of its efforts at unilateral control. It will also be shown how the same unique differentiation could not allow for this kind of control to persist over time – hence the paradoxes of differentiation. The paper concludes by indicating the dangers of superficial abstractions based on temporary states of a system, and advocates a level of abstraction more concerned with action than experience.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“At the end of this century we find ourselves facing new kinds of tasks. The society that we observe today is no longer that of Marx, Weber or Durkheim. And even more so, it is not that of the Enlightenment or the French revolution. More than ever before, the past has lost its binding force and this is also true in regard to the value criteria which once formed the basis for the search for rationality. And perhaps for these reasons knowledge about the future is more riddled with uncertainty than in any previous period. In this situation we can change almost nothing with those instruments specific to science: explanation and prognosis. It must be possible, however, to describe adequately what we find ourselves facing”

- Quoting Luhmann (King & Anton Schutz 1994:261)

This paper is an attempt to substantiate the impossibility of unilateral control in modern societies with the intention of demonstrating the dangers behind social theorizations based on such temporary system conditions. Based on his works on general systems, biological and mathematical theories, Niklas Luhmann, a German sociologist of the late 20th century argued that unilateral control of one part of a social system by another is impossible in that such control depends on the manipulation of the same structures that gave rise to it in the first place. Such manipulation, especially when it is based on the undermining of the basic structures of the social system, cannot exist for long without seriously undermining its own survival. With a system always trying to stabilize itself over time, Luhmann argues that the only way complete domination can ever be achieved is through the complete destruction of one system by another. Without such destruction, there will always be resistance and hence, an attempt to dominate will be highly precarious if not entirely impossible. Therefore, in this paper I hope to illustrate the need for social theorization that is based on non-temporal conditions of the system.

In this paper I will attempt to show how such unilateral control is impossible by using the example of the South African social system. For the purpose of this thesis, I will consider the system to encompass all regions of South Africa where the unilateral control effort of the Apartheid sub system was felt. To do that, I will outline Luhmann's conception of what a social system is and what different features it possesses. It will be through discussing these features – differentiation and adaptation – that I will try to demonstrate how it is possible for one system to dominate another system *temporarily*. This paper will demonstrate how differently adapted and differentiated social systems could possess qualities that are different from each other and how that could in turn disproportionately benefit or harm the systems in their environment with which they come into contact. I will use the example of the early occupation of the Americas as an example of systems destroying each other (and hence the achievement of complete domination by one system) and how in other places, such as South Africa, the lack of such complete destruction resulted only in the temporary domination of those who did not have guns, steels and germs by their side.

The 'impossibility' in the impossibility of domination is, in part, due to the definition of time that Luhmann chooses to work with. For Luhmann, the temporal dimension of systems plays a great role in the proper understanding of modern societies and social systems. What Luhmann's conception of time and temporality suggests is that domination, if achieved, is achieved only temporarily and that it can never be the defining structural feature of a system. The same way adaptation and differentiation *are* defining structural features; domination is *not* – for the reason that it is not persistent over time. In the same way, what is evident from reading Luhmann is not that domination is impossible, but that it comes to exist only under unique circumstances. Paradoxically, it is the same unique circumstances

that eventually make such unilateral control impossible. Luhmann's admonition of the possibility of domination is based on the temporal dimension of systems and on the argument that self-sabotage cannot be a defining feature of a system.

Not everyone agrees with Luhmann. Until very recently, he was not well known outside European circles (Rasch 2000). Even when known, there were many who indicted Luhmann for being ideologically and politically motivated and attributed the absence of solutions in his theorization as an indication of his need to maintain the *status quo* (Wolfe 1994)¹. Some claim that there are fundamental philosophical problems² with his theories, which I will not describe here. In addition, his method of analysis (functional analysis) has been the focus of many debates even before his time and continues still³. Other critics found that his idea of autopoiesis has problems regarding empirical investigation.⁴ Not only have his works garnered controversy, but the way he presents his work is sometimes very hard to understand. Self-admittedly and admitted by others, his works are very dense and make for strenuous reading in almost all cases (Misgeld 1994).

¹ Wolfe admonishes Luhmann's attempts as being motivated ideologically when he said "What Luhmann's epistemological idealism refuses to confront is that the differentiation, autonomy, and undoing of complexity it imagines remains muffled and mastered by the economic context of identity and the rule of exchange value within which systems theory historically arises. And in that refusal, in its pragmatic effect of socially reproducing the liberal status quo, it is clear that there are powerful ideological reasons, as well as epistemological ones, why one cannot see what one cannot see." (Wolfe 1994:127)

² Please see Jean Clam's claims where he tried to show the underlying philosophical weakness of Luhmann's theory (Clam 2000).

³ Bednarz, J., 1984 describes how functional analysis has been debated even from the level of describing the function properly.

⁴ Neves (2001) discusses the empirical limits of the concept of autopoiesis in detail.

How the paper is organized

In chapter two, I will outline and discuss (in part) Luhmann's social and psychic system theories. In social systems, I will particularly focus on systems, environments, boundaries, relations, selection, complexity, information and differentiation with the intention of showing how difficult it is for these self-referencing systems to allow unilateral control. Since I will be discussing how the Apartheid subsystem was an attempt to create a state of unilateral control by manipulating certain aspects of the system, my discussion of the elements of Luhmann's theory will endeavour to show the crucial components of the system that the Apartheid subsystem tried to manipulate. In addition, I will discuss Luhmann's theory of psychic systems to illustrate the difficulties of integration in cases where separately evolved social systems come together to form one social system. Such difficulties, along with the functionally-differentiated system's inherent property of indifference, have permitted the success of the temporary domination that was exercised by the Apartheid subsystem.

In addition, Chapter two will contain a section on the temporal dimension of systems and the need for scientific history for the proper analysis of society and social systems. Since I will be using only a few historical examples that I think are relevant in the description of the development of societies, I will do so with Luhmann's guidance of how to go about doing this in a manner which is devoid of ideological charges and psychic experiences. Neither the reasons nor the experiences of the involved need to be taken into account in the analysis of systems (at least in my case) and accordingly my thesis will concentrate mainly on the actual events (such as the enactment of Legislation) and not on the reasons behind the occurrence of these. According to Luhmann, what is important is to recognize the fact that a selection

has been made among options and one way or another the selections made will influence the subsequent selections the system will make.

My argument for the temporary possibility of domination is from the premise that there are societies that adapted and differentiated according to their immediate environments, and it is such adaptation that equips one society with apparent superiority over another when confronted with the other. In addition, I will show how complete domination has been possible (occupation of the Americas by the Spanish conquistadors) where one system has completely destroyed the competing system and occupied its space. What I will try to show in Chapter three is (a) how it is possible that different societies could adapt and develop differently (b) how the only meaningful type of domination (according to Luhmann) is when one system destroys another, and (c) examples of slavery and colonialism as types of unsuccessful domination.

The example that I use for the possibility of temporary domination is that of the Apartheid subsystem in the South African social system. I will show, in chapter four, how the creative manipulation of boundaries and information allowed the dominance by means of civilised control of a relatively small group who gained unilateral control over South African society. I will use the actions taken by the Apartheid subsystem regarding the formal education and settlement of the South African population to demonstrate this manipulation. In addition, I will argue that such domination was facilitated by the inherent indifference built into any system that is highly differentiated functionally. I will demonstrate this by examining the example of Steve Biko's belief in the impossibility of a joint struggle of the different systems in play.

Finally, I will conclude by reiterating Luhmann's refrain that the scientific investigation of societies that are not ideologically charged cannot start from such a temporary condition as domination.

What this paper is not

This paper is not a literature review. Indeed, it is difficult to find works that use Luhmann's conceptions of modernity and social systems and apply them to the understanding of a general social system without digressing to political or economic analysis. Depending on the level of abstraction the author is aiming for, there are more works aimed at the meta-theoretical level than at the economic, political and ecological levels. Regardless, I have been unable to find and draw ideas from works that employed the type of theory that I've devised in this paper. As outlined above, what I want to show is how the self-sabotage of a system is not and cannot be considered the defining feature of the system and how this self-sabotage should be recognized as a temporary condition. Such understanding of systems will help anyone who is looking to find, as it were, the chinks in the armour of the system that she wants to investigate. Although not discussed in this paper, such an analysis may well reveal the different subtle and obvious reasons behind the daily headlines in the contemporary world.

In addition, this paper is not an argument for the use of Luhmann's theory or a defence of its weaknesses. It is not my intention to counter Luhmann's critics or celebrate his success in creating a useful tool to describe society. The success or failure of this paper ultimately depends on the persuasiveness of Luhmann's claim and my ability to convince the reader of

the same. What I have hoped to do is substantiate, based on historical facts, the theory that unilateral control is not a desirable selection for a system, even if it was selected from time to time from among other competing possible selections. What I hope to demonstrate, with the example of the early American occupation and later the South African Apartheid subsystem, is that unless the 'dominating' system completely wipes out the other system (cleans the environment of all competing systems), total and unilateral control is precarious and undermines the same system that chooses to employ it.

I would also like to remind the reader that this is not the functional analysis of the South African social system. The use of the South African social system and Apartheid is to provide an example of an attempt at a unilateral control. To maintain the discussions at the level of general subsystems, I've chosen not to do an in-depth sub system analysis of the South African system.

Finally, in formulating my argument, I have tried to avoid the temptation to use secondary source material on Luhmann and have managed to base most of my explication of his theory on my original reading and understanding of certain sections of his work in Social Systems (SS) and The Differentiation of Society (DS)⁵.

⁵ Social Systems, Transl. 1995; the Differentiation of Society, Transl. 1982. Because of extensive use of the two works, my in-text citations will be in the form of "(SS p.??)" for Luhmann et al. 1995 and "(DS p.??)" for the latter.

CHAPTER 2: LUHMANN'S THEORY OF SYSTEMS

Society is a system. Social systems consist of events. The raw materials of events are communications. Communications in turn describe themselves as actions. They represent, as it were, disorder within the system. From this disorder, the system gains its contours through self-description. This is achieved through attribution. Attribution converts communications into events located in time, and these in turn are actions.... Thus, society is a system, and the elements of the system are not people, but communications. Communications create problems, which in turn can only be solved by other communications. This means that the system is recursively closed. This closure ensures the self-continuation of society, in other words: its autopoiesis. The problems communication creates – and then solves – for itself are its unreasonableness, opacity, dissent and, in particular, its transitoriness. Structures are created to link communications, such as institutions, media codes, processes, etc. (Schwanitz 1996:488)

In this section, I will try to showcase Luhmann's theory of social and psychic systems as it will become relevant to my discussion of South Africa later. I will show the different facets of his conceptions of social and psychic systems and how they are interrelated. I am particularly interested in the different features that Luhmann considers the building blocks of systems such as social systems. In addition, I will discuss the role played by time in the theorizing of systems and how it is impossible for his theory to work without a complex conception of time. Luhmann insists that without a complex conception of time, describing complex systems becomes next to impossible. By doing this, I hope to justify my choice to employ the time analysis of systems.

The section on social and psychic systems will outline the basic features of Luhmann's theory of social and psychic systems and will deal in part with how the two are interrelated. Even though Luhmann does not spend much time discussing psychic systems particularly, the nature of the relationship between social and psychic systems forces one to examine both seriously. In addition, it is on these basic constructs of theory that Luhmann bases his

most devastating critiques of modernity – such as the impossibility of domination, centre-less societies and the ambivalence of the masses which I will discuss later.

Finally, since the object of this thesis is to demonstrate the complexity and differentiation of societies as conceived by Luhmann, and because I will be using a loose historical analysis of events to demonstrate the same, I find the proper depiction of time and how it is important in the theorization of social systems invaluable in strengthening my argument. By the end of this chapter, I hope to have fully demonstrated Luhmann's theory of social systems and justified my use of a historical approach as a method of analysis of differentiation and complexity.

2.1. Luhmann's Theory of Social and Psychic Systems

Social Systems

Luhmann starts with the assertion that social systems do exist and that he will not start with an 'epistemological doubt' about their existence (SS p.12). As it unfolds, his work is a testament against any doubt of the existence of social systems. According to him, not only do they exist, they are also ontologically distinct from psychic systems (SS p.14). For Luhmann, social systems are not reducible to individual psychic systems although psychic systems are the necessary environment of social systems. It is on these premises that Luhmann bases his theory of social systems. What are systems? How do they come into being and maintain themselves? Luhmann thinks he has the answer.

For Luhmann, systems are nothing but the differentiation (specialization and organization) of certain parts of the unorganized and undifferentiated jumbled-mass-chaos that is the environment. The environment is complex and unpredictable whereas a system is the systematic reduction of such complexity that seeks to reduce the risks involved. A specialization of parts of an environment is what eventually emerges as a system. It follows that systems are created out of an environment. Once a system has come into existence, it needs to have structures in place that will make sure that it continues to exist. Otherwise the need to be differentiated and organized is betrayed. For a system to remain a system, it needs to define its boundaries. These boundaries will help in the identification of system elements that belong in the system, and environmental elements that do not belong in the system. Such identification is essential for a system's well being, as it is the only structure that will distinguish a system from its environment. For Luhmann, such boundaries are by no means "a break in connection" between the system and the environment – there will always be the continued "flow of information and energy" to and from the environment (SS p.17). In addition, a boundary is a "system-relative" concept and is to be thought of as being the creation of the system (as opposed to the environment). Luhmann gives the example of the skin of an animal or the membrane of cells to describe a boundary that is produced and maintained by a system (SS p.29)⁶.

The next step in the development of systems is differentiation. As the complexity⁷ of the system increases (e.g., through the proper definition of a boundary that seeks continuously to keep environment elements out and system elements in and becomes creative in doing

⁶ "... viewed from the system's perspective, boundaries are self-generated – membranes, skins, walls and doors, boundary posts and points of contact" (SS p.29)

⁷ I am using the word complexity not as Luhmann's concept of contingency but as the development of a system from its simple form to more complicated one.

so), the need to have different parts of the system that carry out the different tasks to increase efficiency. An internal division of labor will see that the cause of the system, which is to maintain a distinction from the environment by reducing such complexities as the environment and reducing risks, could be enhanced. Luhmann likens this process to different rooms in a house. If the outside walls of the house are the system boundaries, the different rooms with the different functions, represent the internal differentiation and division of labor that follows the need to specialize in the quest to enhance the existence of the system. According to Luhmann, differentiation should not be mistaken for hierarchization which is but a form of differentiation (SS p.19). Luhmann insists that there is a differentiation that does not necessarily involve hierarchy and that hierarchy is but a form of differentiation among many other types of differentiations.

Such system differentiation is made possible if the system has an internal mechanism for producing structures and effects that help in the process of differentiation. For Luhmann, an understanding of (social) systems that is based on systems and their environments has important implications for the traditional “understanding of causality” in that the question now becomes “from which perspective” (is it from the system or the environment?) (SS p.19). It is no longer possible to describe social systems in terms of cause and effect but in terms of actual actions and what is produced. Therefore, in the continuous quest to maintain itself, the system needs to carry out tasks (produce) that will ensure this. This will be in the form of the possible productions that can be carried out. Since not all effects can

be produced at the same time, Luhmann suggests that we consider the need for the systems theory concept of selection in understanding production⁸.

The question that immediately follows is, *how is production made possible?* Although not stated explicitly in Luhmann's explanation of elements and relations, it is self-evident that production is made possible through the interaction of elements in the system. Actually, Luhmann argues that there could be no element without a relation (and vice versa) as one is the necessary condition of the other⁹. It is these relations that Luhmann uses for what he calls the second type of successful "decomposition of a system" (SS p.21). The first decomposition was differentiation (decomposing the system in terms of smaller subsystems with their own version of a system and environment within the system – the systems that he explained as the rooms of a house). The second method of decomposing the system is through complexity which Luhmann likens to the building blocks (nails, beams, bricks) of a house. For Luhmann, complexity occurs "because of immanent constraints in the elements' connective capacity [and] it is no longer possible at any moment to connect every element with every other element" (SS p.24). Or, in other words, it is the condition of "being forced to select" (SS p.25). This explains how it is possible that "different kinds of systems [can be] formed out of a substratum of very similar units" such as molecules from the same type of atoms and organisms from the same type of cells.

Adaptation is the next function Luhmann considers, following from the need to select .

Adaptation, it seems, is what gives the system the ability to maintain itself through the

⁸ "What is essential to the concept is not the technical possibility of being calculated or even executed by machines, but rather this 'some, but not all.' This difference makes selection possible, and selection makes retention possible." (SS p.20)

⁹ "Just as there are no systems without their environments, or environments without systems, there are no elements without relational connections or relations without elements" (SS p.20)

complexity of the environment and of itself¹⁰. Luhmann insists that an understanding of the “unity of the plurality” of system and environment (which he defines as “ecology”) is essential in understanding adaptation (SS p.31) and that selection (selection in the non-Darwinian sense) plays a key part in the adaptation process. Luhmann argues that Darwin’s conclusion of selection “as not occurring out of a will to order, but as occurring out of the environment” was based on the “philosophy of contingency and pragmatism” of the time which gave the “subject-less” act of selection an “ontological scope” (ibid). Therefore, adaptation is the result of a selection made by the system because it needed to select and that is its *only* objective. For Luhmann, such complete de-ontologisation of the selection process has considerable implications for the current understanding of societies.

All concepts discussed so far, from the system-environment relationship, to boundaries, differentiations, production, complexity and adaptation are related to the theory’s important component – an understanding of the need and ability of the system to refer to itself: self-reference. What the functions just listed confirm is that the system is a system of relations in that its relating elements are the ones that dictate what is to be selected.

Luhmann thinks this self-referencing nature of systems is the “central theme to be addressed” in his theory of self-referential systems (SS p.32). As I shall describe later, this is also the function that Luhmann uses to substantiate his claims that “no part of a system can control another part” (SS p. 36) which is the central claim of this paper.

¹⁰ One of Luhmann’s arguments here is that the system needs to adapt. He says, “a system had to adapt to its environment in order to survive... complex systems must adapt not only to their environments but also to their own complexity.” (SS p.31)

In describing self-referencing systems, Luhmann argues that such systems are unique in that they are a unity and cannot be known by reducing them to their elements¹¹. In addition, these self-referencing systems are closed systems in that they “operate by self-contact; they possess no other form of environmental contact than this self-contact” (SS p.33) and “they allow no other form of processing in their self-determination” (SS p.34). For example the human social system that according to Luhmann is a meaning system, is closed “to the extent that only meaning can refer to meaning and that only meaning can change meaning” (SS p.37).

Psychic Systems

The reason why I chose to include Luhmann’s theory of psychic systems in my study is because of its ability to describe how and where the individual psychic system interacts with the social system. As I will outline shortly, this zone of communication where individual questions and social system answers meet will give an idea of how expectations and claims are produced and maintained (I will discuss the concepts “claims” and “expectations” shortly). It is my argument that it is these claims and expectations that allow a person (a psychic system) to know how to interact with his (or her) environment (which is the social system). Where the social system is very pervasive and manipulates information towards an end that is not necessarily compatible with the individual psychic system, it will still be accepted and incorporated as an individual claim. In this way, the psychic system is handed its claims and expectations and it will carry out the desired effects of the social system. If

¹¹ Luhmann argues that “unity can come about only through a relational operation, that it must be produced and that it does not exist in advance as an individual, a substance, or an idea of its own operation” (SS p.33)

there is little or no opportunity for reflexivity, the claims inherited from the system will become individual claims.

In addition, I will discuss Luhmann's concept of emotions to bring to light how the incompatibility of the individual claims and the social system's needs are mediated, which will shed light on how it will be possible for psychic systems to continue to exist within an environment (social system) that is not supportive, but is still needed if the distinction between an environment and a system is to be made and maintained. I hope a depiction of a psychic system will shed light on the possibility of isolated psychic systems adapting separately (depending on their environments) and the notion that they could be different enough to have much that is not common when they discover each other.

For Luhmann and his study of Social Systems, "individual" psychic systems feature very little. He maintains that communication is the only constitutive element of societies and that "social systems are not composed of psychic systems, let alone of bodily human beings" (SS p.255). For this reason, he is also known for asserting that he is not concerned with people but with systems. He does not "care" for people as he believes that a social system cannot be reduced to the individuals that are found in it. Therefore, Luhmann starts his theory of psychic systems by disregarding the classical attempt at reducing societies to individual members as the last indivisible elements that make up a society, to understand the workings of a society. He argues that the individual as a "unit of empirical investigation" is no more useful in the process of understanding how society works, than "statistical aggregates [and] grand theories" – and considers assertions that this is the case as false (SS pp.255-6).

With regard to the systems/environment conceptualization of societies, from the infinitely complex environment, equally varied systems are created based on the conditions under which they were formed. These systems will have their own internal complexities (what Luhmann calls “internal endlessness”) which make them virtually impossible to be known and used as instances of “totality”¹². Luhmann argues that the move towards considering the individual as the unit of empirical investigation has a long tradition that spans the late medieval period through to modernity¹³.

Luhmann’s theory of psychic systems can be reduced to the following (for the scope of this paper): (a) psychic systems are the environment of social systems, (b) psychic systems are conscious systems, (c) these systems are conscious of themselves and exist by continually being conscious (self-referencing), (d) the interface of communication for psychic systems and their environment (social systems) is through expectations, (e) expectations are condensed to claims, and (f) where claims are not realized, the psychic system depends on emotion to help it continue its self reference (in the face of unmet expectations and unrealized claims) (SS pp.263-271).

Like other systems, psychic systems are closed systems¹⁴ and therefore “construct themselves out of self constituted elements” (SS p.262). Like systems that create boundaries that differentiate between elements of the system and elements of the environment, conscious systems create similar boundaries that help them create differentiations between

¹² “Each system has its own “internal endlessness”. None can be observed in its totality and in the bases for its decisions. Therefore, it is in principle false to assume that individuals are better, or at least more directly observable, than social systems” (SS p.256)

¹³ More detailed explanation could be found in his books *Social Systems* (Individuality of Psychic Systems p. 257-262) where he traces the history of the individual as perceived by different eras and thinkers.

¹⁴ Luhmann compares the conscious system to that of the nervous system and explains how the conscious system needs information from the nervous system in form of pain, etc and how the conscious system is otherwise unable to communicate (SS p.262)

their own elements and elements of the environment. It is through this argument that Luhmann advocated the re-definition of reality as the creation of a conscious system. For Luhmann, reality is created through the self reference of psychic systems and it *is* what consciousness makes of it. He argues that a strong case for phenomenology can be made along these lines (SS. P.263)

These closed psychic systems are the environments of the social system. At the same time the social system is the environment of the psychic system. Like other system/environment relations, psychic systems do also experience contingency and are always trying to reduce the complexities of the environment. Luhmann argues that “an individual psychic system exposes itself to the contingency of its environment in the form of expectations” (SS. p.267).

For psychic systems, we understand expectations to signify a form of orientation, by which the system scans the contingency of its environment in relation to itself and which it then assumes as its own uncertainty within the process of autopoietic reproduction... After a certain period of conscious life enriched by social experiences, completely random expectations cease to occur (SS. p.268)

Luhmann also discusses what happens when expectations are not met¹⁵. He explains how emotions are vital in dealing with such unmet expectations by acting as the ‘immune system’ of the psyche. From this, it can be seen that the continuous assault of the social system plays a part in modifying the expectations of the conscious life. Luhmann concludes that expectations will eventually be “condensed to claims” to minimize the condition of emotions (ibid). He makes a distinction between expectations and claims when he explains:

¹⁵ For Luhmann, unmet expectations occur when “the process of internal adaptation to fulfilment” is compromised (SS p.269).

The distinction between expectations and claims make it possible to peruse the question of what occurs psychologically when individually grounded claims are increasingly socially legitimated and when the social order finally incites individuals to put forward even their individuality as a claim – as the claim to recognition and as the claim to promoting what makes one happy. (SS p.269)

It will be based on these ideas that I try to show how the individuality of psychic systems (and the continued assault by social systems) makes it difficult for systems that evolved separately to understand each other enough to collaborate towards a common goal – at least in the initial stages of interaction. I will be tracing how such differences in the differentiation of social systems can occur, and detailing what can transpire upon mutual discovery of such different systems.

Systems and Time

So far I have noted how Luhmann conceptualizes a system (any system) without the concept of time attached to it. For Luhmann, the concept of time cannot be reduced to chronological time or the change that follows from it¹⁶. For him, it is impossible to understand a system, boundaries, elements and relation, complexity, information, selection, without a proper understanding of time and its importance in situating a system. In addition to the self-reference argument provided by Luhmann earlier, it is my argument that his concept of time is the second reason why Luhmann repudiates the impossibility of ‘absolute domination’ or what he calls the demise of the “old thematic of oppression” (SS p17-18).

¹⁶ Luhmann considers time as a multiplier of all problems so far presented and calls for a proper conceptualization of time if a sense is to be made of systems: he argues neither that the concept of time as ‘mere change’, nor as ‘chronology’ adequately describes its importance (SS p.41-42). I will elaborate on this in section 2.4.

Luhmann's concept of system time goes beyond the traditional views. He concedes that the notion of time can be used interchangeably with change and that time is also useful in its chronological sense. But he insists that such conceptualization of time, though useful, falls short of giving a clear picture of what time means for the system and how the system deals with the existence of time. For Luhmann, its value in reduction of complexity, and its value in storing and speeding up selection make it an important function in the conceptualization of systems. For the purpose of this paper, I will only deal with these aspects.

Time as change is noted by Luhmann as the only meaningful way of conceptualizing any system change (SS p.42). It is only when time is factored in that one can speak of the presence of change. For an event or production to take place, first there needs to be the right elements, they then need to relate, the relation produces the desired outcome and then it is past. This is the way Luhmann explains the need to conceptualize time as change. Following from this, time is also an essential part of the reduction of complexity. As noted above, since not all relations between elements are possible simultaneously, there will be a need to select which relations happen first and which relations follow. Luhmann argues that 'selective ordering' is another function of time which allows specifically for such synchronization of element relations.

On the other hand, Luhmann conceptualizes time as the necessary element in the creation of memory and speeding up of element relations (SS p.41). Luhmann argues that past events are recoded and used appropriately when the need arises (e.g., when similar relations are required in the present). In addition, the same process is used to speed-up system relations. By speeding up, Luhmann means that system relations can be predicted by inferring from how long they took to happen and what elements were employed in the

relation. Once these are included in the equation, a speeding up of time will be possible for the system in order to see probable future selections.

2.2. The Problem of Time in Luhmann's Theory

I've just sketched Luhmann's conception of time and how he uses it in the theorization of social systems. I need to elaborate further on his conception of time to support my use of historical examples and my argument of the impossibility of unilateral control. Since I will be using the rise and fall of the Apartheid subsystem in the South African social system¹⁷ as an example, I would like to draw attention to what it means to make such an analysis based on Luhmann's work and critical conceptualization of 'scientific history' and 'relevant historical facts'. Even if it can be applied generally, the conception of time that Luhmann tries to address (which I think will support my argument) and which is present here, is directly related to time in highly differentiated social systems.

In brief, what Luhmann tries to achieve and tries to convince his reader of is the need to make a clear distinction between "historical research" and "historical consciousness" (DS p289). In other words, Luhmann tries to distinguish between "experience" and "action" (DS p290) which he believes to hold the key to historical research. What matters, it seems, is not what is felt or experienced or any of the emotions associated with the historical facts.

Neither the reasons behind the events nor the psychological effects of the outcomes are significant other than to point to the fact that something *did* happen. What is important in

¹⁷ Since the concept of systems and environments could introduce more complexities than intended for in this paper, and may well encompass all social systems in the world, the social system I chose to define is that of the South African system – a system that was created at a point when its national borders were defined. I am interested in examining the effects (attempts at a unilateral control) of the Apartheid subsystem within the South African social system (a system that includes the whole population of South Africa and the structures that existed at the time).

such historical research (as far as Luhmann is concerned) is that something happened. In other words, among many possible options one was selected – what the basis of this selection was should have little bearing in such research¹⁸. The only thing that matters is that subsequent selections will be cognizant of the original choice and will select to either maintain or destroy the possible chains of events that might follow (depending on the state of the system, its contingencies and availability of time).

Luhmann starts his exposition of time by indicting both sociologists and historians for failing to properly conceptualize time. “[N]ormally neither historians nor sociologists ask about the nature of time... there is a substantial danger that, if we leave this question unaddressed, we shall think about social history in crude and inadequate ways” (DS p299). Luhmann does concede the fact that there may be no “universally valid and precise” concept of time but holds that it can be made “more precise” using the concepts of systems theory (DS p299-300). In addition, Luhmann suggests that we should “consider the past as a particular object domain and ask under what condition we can come to know it... whenever we want to make knowledge more like inter-subjectively valid science and less like private reminiscence” (DS p289)¹⁹.

As discussed in the theoretical section on systems, temporality is not an option, neither is system history. That is what makes a system what it is. Since differentiation of a system produces temporality (DS p292) the nature of complexity itself determines how

¹⁸ “Through a historical research, a society becomes more or less independent from its own memory; if it does maintain its memory, it is only because the memory is serving other functions. In addition, historical research may succeed in neutralizing interests that govern how decisions are currently being made.” (p.319)

¹⁹ “One possibility for systems theory would be to focus on change in the structures of social systems and to define stabilizing or destabilizing, progressive or pathological developments as changes in those structures which determine the conditions that make further change possible. Then, we would have succeeded in formulating, however abstractly, a criterion of historical relevance: the problem to what extent selectivity is conserved in system/environmental relations.” (DS p.311)

contingencies are managed. This results in specific selections (or actions) that take place. It is from this perspective that Luhmann argues when he states that “historical events [should be] viewed as relevant or meaningful not because they are purely factual and not merely because of the sequence in which they happen to occur, but rather ... as having been selected from an array of other possibilities” (DS p293). Accordingly, he concludes that “history is a process in which selections are made from a horizon of possibilities” and that “world history ... must be understood theoretically as evolution – at least in a society which cultivates an interest in history that is scientific rather than merely political or ideological.” (DS p.293-294)

From this, Luhmann advocates the “technical neutralization” of history (DS p319). This need for a context-free temporal horizon (the need for history that is devoid of “experiences”) stems from his view of the system’s inability to utilize its own system memory adequately after high levels of differentiation. According to Luhmann, “in a [highly differentiated] society which must anticipate communicative exchanges that cross system-boundaries, a system’s memory of its own history is no longer structurally adequate. Abstractions are needed as coordinating generalizations that permit [researchers] at least to relate, if not integrate, different system histories.” (DS p.302). With enough neutralization, Luhmann argues “the history of a system serves as a non-technical guarantee that further experience and actions can be selected that will fit in with what went before” (DS p.296). (Luhmann continues to explain how a system of law can be a ‘technical guarantee’ in that it is formulated and integrated in societies where there is a claim to a “shared past”.)

Drawing mainly on organisational management literature, Luhmann argues that the neutralization of history does not mean the forgetting of history²⁰. For example, in an organization, “the constraints governing the choice of a new person for a position lie not in the present occupant but in the position's problems and directives which are kept constant...” and, therefore, “the technical neutralization of history serves the function of not excluding but of specifying what is historically relevant [and] *this depends on a fundamentally ambivalent relation to the past*” (DS p.317, 319).

Although not stated explicitly, Luhmann’s rejection of experience is nothing but his refusal to conflate social and psychic systems. It is only within the domain of psychic systems that experience will have any historically valid meaning. In cases where the interest is the social and not the psychic (which is in Luhmann’s case) to conflate the two will result in the “crude and inadequate” conceptualization of time (system history) by historians and sociologists, a conflation that Luhmann indicts mercilessly.

To conclude this chapter of theory, I would like to point to the temporal dimension of time and how it brings to the attention of the researcher the temporal nature of functions and relations. Viewed from this angle, the concept of absolute control seems to waver. If unilateral control does exist in a self-referential, meaning-bound, communication-dependant social system, it does so temporarily and the time dimension of systems indicates its temporality. In addition, based on theories of complexity and degrees of differentiation between the dominating and dominated, it can be easily shown that

²⁰ “A distancing from history need not be a lapse into primitive ahistoricity, or into a dismantling or forgetting of the past.”(DS p.317)

domination can come into temporal existence and cannot be a permanent function of a system.

In this paper I've tried to concentrate mainly on the relevant facts that help my explanation of the impossibility of unilateral control which span a world history of not more than 500 years. In the following chapter, I discuss the nature of differentiation and how differently evolved social systems react to each other at first contact. To substantiate Luhmann's claim that the only true domination is the total destruction of one system by the other, I will use the example of the Spanish Conquistadors to show how some of the earlier contacts between Europeans and Americans resulted in the near-complete destruction of the Americans. Then I will try to illustrate the result of non-destruction (what I prefer to call pseudo-integration of different social systems) by looking at such systems as slavery and colonialism.

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CHAPTER 3: DIFFERENTIATION AND DIFFERENT SOCIETIES

3.1. Differentiation of Societies

The boundaries that were set up during the evolution of the system determine to what extent the system is to remain a system and does not become part of the environment around it. Since the function of the boundary is to determine which elements belong within the system and which are part of the environment, it will do so as long as the environment is within a manageable region of negotiation which the system understands and counters. The co-evolution of the system and the environment under such circumstances allows the system to predict what kind of environment it is faced with and prepare for this.

For example, in the case of a mud hut that relies on a single (wooden) pillar for its support, the system (the hut) can withstand a certain degree of wind (environment). The threshold of the walls/pillar of the hut is determined by what the system believes to be the appropriate strength required for the pillar – based on previous experiences of wind *and* the extent to which the system can produce the counteracting boundary. The same is true of a skyscraper made of steel, bricks and mortar. The only difference to be seen here is that the skyscraper can withstand an environment (e.g., climatologically) that could easily devastate the hut.

The same wind speed and other climatologically initiated forces that can wipe out a whole village of mud huts might well have no effect on the sturdy construction of the big building.

Luhmann's concept of centre-less societies (DS p.xv) is like a skyscraper that has many pillars and support structures. Unlike the mud hut with its single wooden pillar for support (which will cause it to collapse if compromised), the modern building (based on its construction) can allow for high levels of resistance. Although the strength of even a big building could be compromised if its major structural components are jeopardized, the amount of effort it will

take for this to happen is unparalleled to what could easily devastate the mud hut.

Therefore, for the skyscraper, there are many functions that have nothing to do with its support. Actually, it will not be impossible to imagine that the actual support system is invisible to those in the building (unlike the small hut where the pillar is the centre of everything and could be seen). The hidden nature of the structures and the functional diversity encountered in the big building naturally makes the occupants if not completely indifferent, then completely unaware of their role. Because of their highly differentiated nature, such structures could be ignored safely without compromising the functioning of the particular system. The only subsystem that would be concerned with the strength and carrying/withstanding capacity of the building is the system that built it and that maintains it. As far as the rest of the system is concerned, it does not even exist.

Of course, this is not to say that there is no environment that is adverse enough to destroy a highly differentiated system. This is simply to show how the difference in the levels and complexities of differentiation can be demonstrated by holding the environment constant and varying the systems in it. As was shown above, the two systems respond differently to the same environment – one is not affected and the other is destroyed. The extent to which a system can be destroyed can be predicted by its level of co-evolution with the environment and the strength of its boundaries (which are the direct result of such evolution).

Therefore, coming back to Luhmann's idea of functionally differentiated societies and other societies, it can also be shown that functionally differentiated societies are much more stable. Given the same environment, highly differentiated systems can respond better (by not being destroyed) than the systems that succumb to it. If survival is the measure of

success as a system, this is a clear example of how functionally differentiated systems are much more stable and, compared to the undifferentiated systems, can withstand more pressure from the environment.

Based on this premise I now go on to show the evolution of how a functionally well-differentiated social system (the Western system) reacted to the presence of other social systems in its environment. I will show how the first contact of the Spanish Conquistadors resulted in the near-complete destruction of the South Americans (which is the only type of domination Luhmann will accept). Then I will show the pseudo-integration attempts of the Western system in its slave trade and colonial endeavours in order to demonstrate the impossibility of unilateral control without destruction.

3.2. Adaptation and the Differentiation of Social Systems

Luhmann's concept of adaptation of a system and environment describes the necessity of the co-evolution of the system and its environment²¹. This necessity arises from the system's need to maintain itself through the definition of its boundaries. As the environment changes, the system needs to respond accordingly by making the necessary changes that ensure the continued existence of its boundaries. As noted in the section describing the theory of social systems, a system employs its boundaries as the mechanism by which its elements are distinguished from the environment. Since reduction of complexity (contingencies and risk) is the only way by which the system manages to stay a system (and not become the undifferentiated chaos of the environment), tracking and

²¹ "Evolution is the co-evolution of systems and environments" (SS p. 26)

identification of its environment along with the changes that are constantly occurring is the major process by which adaptation can be guaranteed.

This concept of adaptation, I believe, has a major implication for understanding the possibility of the difference in differentiations between various social systems that occur in the world. Especially where climatic and geographical differences are prevalent, it is plausible to assume that social systems that do not have the need or the capacity to communicate with each other, develop differently from one another. In our world (and in times where technological advances did not allow for complex forms of communication) such significant barriers to communication as geographical isolation (presence of large bodies of water or deserts, mountain ranges, climactic zones) ultimately resulted in the evolution of social systems that adapted to their respective environments under different conditions.

Even where such climato-geographical barriers are absent, systems are continually seen to evolve independently of each other within an environment and as the environments of each other. From the theory of systems, it can be deduced that the whole point of differentiation in a system is to create a functional part where production takes place in an increasingly specialized and system-relevant manner. Although the totality of the system may need the functionality of that specific differentiation (for its survival), it does not follow from that that other subsystems are directly dependant on that particular sub system for their survival.

Therefore, it is safe to conclude that such specializations are the products of the environment (whether a system creating environment, or a subsystem creating environment within a system) and are the inevitable products of system formation.

Different social systems come into existence all over the world that are distinct from each other in terms of differentiation (for example through being sufficiently isolated from each other by significant geographical and climatic barriers). Accordingly, if differentiation is like the rooms of a house as Luhmann would have it, my argument is that depending on the conditions under which the house continues to exist, the house may have differing number of rooms (not to mention the types of building blocks) with different functions. There could be many rooms of bricks and mortar in one situation and only a single room of wood in another.

First contact of separately differentiated social systems

If it is accepted that such difference in evolution could result in uniquely differentiated social systems, the next question would be: *What are the implications of the discovery of one unique system by another?* Fortunately, there is a large body of literature on this type of first contact including the Old Testament of the Bible. Indeed, I would like to assume that the favourite histories of battles are actually the coming into contact of two different systems. In addition, such coming into contact almost invariably led to the formation of a system that is dictated by those that won the battle. If the one party is not completely destroyed, what is left is assimilated. The concept of plurality was not considered where difference meant danger and the other was automatically categorized as part of the environment²².

²² Rattansi (2007) argues that the existence of racism is the result of perceivable differences, usually physical that justified the conditions.

Conflicts over resources that have been in evidence since the early part of human history (and indeed are still part of many animal systems) seem to consider anyone that is not part of the family/tribe as part of the environment and thus needing to be dealt with accordingly. Outsiders were a direct threat to the survival of the system and their presence needed to be adequately addressed if the survival of the system was to be maintained. The environment is always a threat to the system in that it threatens to collapse the system and make it part of the environment. A dispute over territory is most likely to be resolved by a physical confrontation and a winner-takes-all result rather than negotiations and peaceful resolutions. In the end, what remains will be a single system, not two systems that live comfortably side by side. The winner, which was the environment of the loser system, comes out as the only system. The loser system is now reduced to part of the environment, that is, it is destroyed. In cases where the complete domination via annihilation of the other system is not possible, different strategies are employed. A possible way of reducing differences could be such subsystems as marriage that seeks to reduce the cultural differences.

An example of the breaking down of the assimilate-or-perish way of societies that confront each other is that of the Norman invasion of the British Islands. It seems the Normans were content being Normans and wanted no integration, apart from economic, with the natives of the island that led, according to some, to the early sentiments of racism²³. But this can be attributed to the fact that the two systems were in fact very close geographically to each other and regarded each other as human systems. Unfortunately, such was not the fate that befell the new world. As far as the Conquistadors were concerned, the social systems that

²³ Banton (1978) suggests that early sentiments of racism were born of the lack of interest for assimilation exhibited by the Normans, conquerors of the British Isles about a 1000 years ago, who were content to collect taxes.

existed in central and southern America at the time of their invasion were just parts of the environment to which they needed to adapt. No effort was made to integrate. In addition, the disease and guns that the Spanish brought with them managed to reduce the existing social systems to the chaos of the environment²⁴.

The Conquistadors

A good example of 'first contact' for this paper is the Spanish Conquistadors meeting with the inhabitants of the American continents. This contact has been characterized as the "real" first contact between the new and the old world (Vivas 1945). What makes it more "real" than other European conquests will be discussed later when I examine the case of Rome. Regardless of 'reality', it was the first time for the Spanish to unleash unparalleled destruction that was almost effortless. The usual tale of a few hundred horsemen routing a whole nation is not so farfetched when seen from the vantage point of the conquistadors. Modern weapons and disease are the reasons frequently cited that are attributed to the quick defeat of the natives of the Americas²⁵. Although there are some disputes as to which one did more damage, it is the general consensus now that the native population was in no position to defend itself against the these forces.

The extent to which this unequal match was detrimental to the natives was captured nicely by Crosby: "The advantages of steel over stone... [and]... canon and firearms over slings and arrows" was unparalleled and those "societies which had created huge empires through generations of fierce fighting collapsed at the touch of the Castilian "(Crosby 1967). Crosby

²⁴ Stookey (2004) describes how the Aztecs used human sacrifices to delay the end of the world.

²⁵ All the following attest to the same: (Butzer 1992; Vivas 1945; Veblen 1977; Stern 1992; Sluyter 1996; Reff 1995; Moor-Ross & Fernandez 1993; Crosby 1967; Blakely & Mathews 1990)

continues to state how other conditions such as prophesies of white gods and the use of horses, which were unfamiliar to the natives may have played a role in the apparently easy defeat of the natives. Added to this were the old world diseases that decimated the native population.. According to Veblen, this “immunologically virgin” population was no match for these old world diseases. The extent of the decimation was so great that it has taken over four centuries for the recovery of the “native demography” (Veblen 1977). Of course, this does not mean that the natives did not put up a fight. They did so and in some cases they had short-lived success. According to research on the topic, there were incidences that resulted in the death of significant numbers of Spanish settlers (Reff 1995).

More interestingly, even after the shock of the initial “first contact” had passed, research shows that the killing of the native population continued in those places where they survived the initial confrontation. One bio-archaeological study shows that the death rate among the native American population in mid-fifteenth century South East (currently Georgia) was unparalleled. According to the findings of the study, this was the result of “hostile encounter” and “nutritional insult” which are interrelated (Blakely & Mathews 1990). In addition, newly introduced farming systems destroyed those cultures and ecologies that somehow escaped the shock of ‘first contact’. Such an incidence was documented by a study that showed how ranchers “circumvented laws meant to protect native cultures and ecologies ... [and]... prevented their [the natives] recovery” (Sluyter 1996).

Therefore, from this example, it can be shown clearly how the two systems (of the Spanish conquistadors and the native population) considered each other as the environment in which the one currently finds itself. This inability of the systems to merge (either peacefully

or by force) aggravated by the diseases and prophecies of doom resulted in the almost complete destruction of the one system. As far as Luhmann is concerned, since unilateral control is achieved only through the destruction of one system by another, it can be said that complete domination had occurred. In addition the frequent portrayal of the Spanish conquistadors and the settler missions as demanding total victory seems to testify to the same. As far as the conquistadors are concerned, even the least vindictive portrayal depicts an aura of pain. Both “brave soldier of faith who will die to help convert the natives” and “ready to cut defenceless natives in half by his sword” betray the refusal to accept anything that is of the natives’ (Moor-Ross & Fernandez 1993). In addition, research shows how the settler missionary communities tried to learn the language of the natives and to understand their culture as well with the intention of converting them (Reff 1995), again attesting to the need to completely transform the natives. This situation, what I prefer to call the ‘shock of first contact,’ resulted in what Butzer called “the creation of new human and cultural landscapes” in the Americas (Butzer 1992).

Not all first contacts and conquests lead to the complete destruction of the conquered. Even before the time of the Spanish conquistadors, the Roman empire consisted of territories that were forcibly captured. In some cases, the unlucky occupants of the territories were destroyed along with their villages and cities. In other cases, Rome would leave the religion and culture of the defeated alone as long as the necessary taxes were paid to Rome²⁶. What is relevant to my discussion here is the fact that the Romans were quite tolerant to other religions and that as long as some of their (Roman “Imperial Cult”²⁷) rituals were observed

²⁶ Bunson’s (Bunson 2002) Encyclopaedia of the Roman Empire lists the major history of the Roman Empire, along with its policies, its conquests and defeats, while Rivers (2007) describes the religions and different religious tolerances exhibited during the time of the Romans.

²⁷ These were ceremonies and rituals to aggrandize the rulers of Rome.

by all under their rule, they allowed cultural and religious freedoms. Of course, there were some religions that were not tolerated and “actively prosecuted” by Rome, of which Christianity was one until its eventual acceptance and championing by converted rulers of Rome.

The reason why all that Rome touched did not turn to dust may not be self evident at first. But, seen from a systems-theoretical point of view it becomes clear that the Roman social system was aware of the different social systems in its environment and vice versa.

Therefore, although there were meaningful differences between the two (Rome and the other), the extent of this difference is not great when compared to an isolated system located across the ocean (like the one encountered by the Spanish conquistadors). In other words, the Romans and their subjects had an idea (if not a complete one) of who the other were and how best to counter them. Although it may not always work out as planned, and one was victorious over the other, in cases like this the element of the systemic “First Contact” shock is greatly reduced (if not altogether absent).

Pseudo-Integration: Slavery, Colonialism and Apartheid

The breaking down of the assimilate-or-perish way of system formation was weakened further for the benefit of the slave trade and (later on) for the formation of colonies. Possibly, the recognition of labour as a resource may have prompted the otherwise mighty systems to keep the conquered alive and utilize their labour. Such pseudo integration was necessary for the economic system and thus complete destruction was not in the best interest of the conquering systems. It is possibly from this point that a discussion of oppression, domination and other forms of unilateral control of one system by another can

be understood²⁸. The pseudo integration that allows the occupation of the same space by different systems but without the structures for actual integration, could be seen as the basis for the discontent of the colonial era and later the movement against Apartheid.

Seen from this angle, it should be fairly simple to deduce that the conquering White civilization was sufficiently different from the conquered native civilizations of the Americas and Africa – at least with regard to warfare and the ability to cause unparalleled destruction to their enemies. From this, it can be concluded that one of the implications of such coming into contact of differently evolved systems is that one system could be completely annihilated. Where complete destruction is not perceived to be the best option for the conquerors, the defeated are allowed to survive but under controlled conditions. It is these conditions that concern many theories of social movements, oppression and domination.

²⁸ Luhmann suggests that there could be no domination or oppression of one system by another, but his rejection is based on the fact that domination is only temporary and the only real domination could be achieved is through the destruction of the other system.

CHAPTER 4: THE POSSIBILITY AND IMPOSSIBILITY OF UNILATERAL CONTROL

Although Luhmann never conceded to the fact that there could be any meaningful concept of oppression in a system (SS p.18)²⁹, it is apparent from an observation of the world today that inequality within societies is highly prevalent. There are great material differences in societies where a relatively small group enjoys material comfort while the vast majority live under significantly deprived conditions. Such inequalities in the world have been thought of to be the result of deliberate manipulation of the social organization by those with political, economic or religious powers. This condition, for a long time, has been labelled 'domination' or 'oppression' meaning an 'act of using power to empower and/or privilege a group at the expense of disempowering, marginalizing, silencing, and subordinating another'. Luhmann would call such a condition 'unilateral control'. As described earlier, Luhmann would argue that given the self-referentiality and temporary nature of a system (such as a social system), domination of one of its subsystems by another cannot really be achieved. If it is achieved, it will only be temporary and can never be a defining feature of the system. There will always be conflicts and resistance from the side that is being controlled and such domination is not in the best long-term interest of the controller.

Starting from such a point of view, the major purpose of this chapter is to explore how unilateral control came into being, and how it was maintained over a time, using Luhmann's model of social systems and how they function. With an explanation of what a (social) system is and what its major functions are already provided in Chapter 2, I hope to illustrate, (1) how the creative manipulation of some of the major functions can be used in the successful domination of one subsystem by another for a period in time, (2) how the

²⁹ Luhmann: Social Systems, 1994 p.18

indifference that is inherent in a functionally well-differentiated subsystem can make it unaware of the conditions of other subsystems than itself, and (3) how it is impossible for unilateral control to be permanent. I will use the South African Apartheid subsystem as an example of how such manipulation of the basic system-features of society were used effectively to make possible the domination of a significantly larger subsystem by a substantially smaller subsystem (I will do this from the view point of Steve Bantu Biko who was a struggle leader of the 1970s and commentator on the Apartheid subsystem). I will argue how difference in societal differentiation (and complexity), combined with strategic control of information, made Apartheid possible and maintained it over a period of time until the early 1990s. Finally, I will discuss the inherent self-sabotage of the Apartheid subsystem.

4.1. How Apartheid was Possible: Temporal Domination

How is domination possible? The systems-theoretical answers to this question can be found in Luhmann's distinction of systems, environments and the co-evolution of both. What is interesting here is not what is said explicitly, but what can be inferred. My argument here is that a system can exert dominion over another through a unique evolution that it undergoes that is different from the evolution of the system that it seeks to dominate. (As I've outlined in the previous chapter, according to Luhmann complete domination is achieved only if the dominating system achieves the complete destruction of the systems in its environment.)

If, like Luhmann argues, the old “thematic of oppression” is no longer useful in systems-theoretical thinking, what can be said of the appearance of such subsystems as Apartheid? How can the engineering of such a subsystem be understood in terms of social systems theory? As I have noted in the introductory section of this paper, an understanding of the systems-theoretical approach to society helps us understand the necessary components that were employed in the process of such conditions. It is my argument that the understanding and creative use of the different functions that constitute a system is the way to achieve such temporary domination.

Luhmann never argued that domination is not possible. He just maintained that such systems as social systems are too self-referential for one section of the system to completely dominate the other. The intricacy and the complex relationship that prevails among the different elements of the system makes the exercise of domination precarious and unsustainable. In addition, Luhmann suggests that if such domination should exist, it will do so with the complete awareness that it will be subjected to an equal resistance from that part of the system it seeks to dominate. Accordingly, because of the system’s need (Luhmann’s “will to order”) to stabilize itself, the ‘oppressing’ subsystem will need to prepare an arsenal of mechanisms through which an artificial order will be maintained.

Creative manipulation of the system

One way of maintaining this order could be through the manipulation of information. Any form of withdrawal of information from a subsystem that needs it to make appropriate selections may well be considered oppression. Systematic removal of information in the

form of different formal education to different populations, censorship of unconventional literature, lack of access to basic resources and spatial restrictions that confine the subsystem to a particular space can all be considered as such. Incidentally, all of these were in effect during the Apartheid's attempt at unilateral control and were the reasons for its relative success.

From my readings of Biko (2004), I can conclude that the Apartheid subsystem managed to create and sustain unilateral control through the creative manipulation of two major features of systems: boundaries and information. Although highly interrelated, the distinction is made in order to describe two major measures that were taken by the Apartheid to ensure dominance. 'Separate development' was the major theme and definition of Apartheid system, and this created physical and cognitive separation between the black and the white population in the country. Physical separation of the population was through residential areas where physical boundaries were along racial lines, and the less apparent cognitive separation was created through the systematic withdrawal of information from the black population in the form of the lower-order (Bantu) formal education and censorship³⁰.

To a large extent, what the Apartheid subsystem managed successfully was the physical separation of the blacks and the whites through different means. Such boundaries seek to create subsystem boundaries that are artificial in the sense that they were not created out of the system's 'will to order' but out of a forced differentiation created and maintained by a certain part of the system. Such a subsystem creates such boundaries for various reasons of which Biko (Biko 2004) sites many (of which the supply of cheap and sustainable labour is

³⁰ There are other ways by which separation was created and maintained but I would like to keep to these two concepts for the purpose of this paper.

one). Other thinkers argue that the system was created to preserve the white race from dying out by controlling the 'coloured problem'³¹ – thought to lead to the dissolving of the white race into the surrounding gene pool and the loss of its uniqueness upon which, it seems, its ontology depended.

This creation of boundaries was managed through various legislations that made the integration and living together of the black and white citizens of the country unlawful³². The residential segregation acts determined boundaries between where the people lived and the population registration acts helped to determine who belonged on which side of the boundary. Forced removals of blacks from mainly white areas and the setting up of settlements for blacks outside the major white areas were partly successful in keeping the physical separation of the populations in effect.

Biko felt that the standard of education the black population received was lower than that of the white population. In addition to this sub standard education, what was even more damning for Biko was that the education consisted of the systematic erasure of the black population's past and histories. Biko (following Fanon) argues that the past is necessary in the creation of a strong sense of self and identity that can question the status quo. It is for the same reasons that the Apartheid system needed to adopt such strategies. If this strategy is successful, sub-standard education would keep the black population as fodder for the labour market while the systematic obliteration of the past keeps the dominated subsystem from drawing upon its system histories (and therefore simply accept the present conditions without reflexivity).

³¹ Coetzee discusses the 'Apartheid Mind' where most of the actions of the system were justified as a desperate attempt to preserve the white race from the eminent domination by the majority of the black race that it finds itself amongst (Coetzee 1991)

³² The Group Areas Act (1950), Population Registration Act (1950)

But this is not a thesis of nostalgia or personal experience of the times. What matters most for my analysis is not what was felt by the population, nor what the reasons were for the domination of the larger group by the smaller. For this thesis, and for what Luhmann calls 'scientific history,' what is 'historically relevant' is the fact that the Apartheid subsystem chose to create an 'artificial' boundary and chose to filter the 'information' that was required for the whole system to make appropriate selections. Of all possible selections, what was actually selected is what is under review here. The Apartheid subsystem *chose* (or *selected*) to create a system of separation that was maintained through systematic filtering and removal of information and through physical boundaries to mitigate contact between the apparently different subsystems.

One way of maintaining unilateral control in a social system is by filtering (or removing) sufficient information from certain sections of the system. Since information is needed to make system selections that affect the system, its importance lies in its ability to make system selections. The quality of information has significant implications for the discussion of systems theory. One of the ways through which the problems of time can be countered is through memory. Any removal or blocking of memory-information is detrimental to any system that depends (in part) on such memory to make appropriate selections. As I have discussed in the theoretical part of this paper (the temporal dimension of systems theory) one of the ways in which complexity is reduced is through the use of memory. Since not all selections are available to be made in an instant, or all elements have relations with all other elements at the same time, the theory suggests that the system sometimes depends upon the memory of past relations and past selections in order to prioritize and negotiate present selections. The removal of such memory will slow down the time taken for a system

to make selections. As far as Biko is concerned, Apartheid's attempt at the erasure of the people's pasts ties in with the logic of unilateral control through the filtering of information and its removal from sections of the system.

From this, it can be concluded that such erasure of the past will result in the slowing down of the system's selection. Instead of making selections that were informed by the co-evolution of the system and environment over many generations, selections will need to be made on available data only. Where the available data ("bits of information needed to make a difference" (SS p.40)) is already manipulated creatively, it will take a longer time to realize that and disregard it.

There is a subtle conflation of psychic and social systems in this argument concerning time and information. Since they are necessary components of each other and since they co-evolve together, the only point I am trying to make here is why the subsystem (in this case Apartheid) found it necessary to modify the system memory. In such a case, Luhmann would probably say that Apartheid is setting up guards against the artificial differentiation it has created and is in this way desperately trying to maintain it. Anyway, the system information is not stored in the psychic system but in the social system from which every new generation receives its quota of claims – via education, media etc.

Difficulty of Integration - Indifference

In addition to the active "creative manipulation" exercised by the system, there is a passive component that is so pervasive that it can almost be disregarded. The former was carried out by the political system and was enforced by legislation and the military, while the latter

is exercised by civil society. As discussed earlier in Chapter three, a highly differentiated social system is also known for its insulation and indifference to what is going on around it that is not directly affecting its own well being. To illustrate this fact as evident in the South African Apartheid subsystem, I've elected to use Steve Biko's writings on the lack of meaningful cooperation between the black liberation movement and white liberals. My argument is that (1) it will be difficult for social systems that developed separately (and which currently co-exist in a system where the separation is encouraged and enforced by legislation) to work together when there are no structures in place for integration, and (2) due to the fact that the precariousness of the existence of black South Africans was either not so evident or was disregarded by the indifference inherent in the system, such unilateral control was allowed to persist for some time.

Biko was certain that no effort at integration was ever going to make any meaningful difference. He contended that if any change was to take place, it needed to take place from within the 'black' social system only, or the 'white' social system only, but not both together and simultaneously. He had several reasons for this view and these concerned the psyche of both blacks and whites and the social system in which they existed. What I hope to do here is explain why Biko thought it was necessary to reject the joint effort of blacks and of white liberals in South Africa in the struggle for freedom. By doing so, I hope to illustrate how the indifference inherent in the Apartheid subsystem worked against any meaningful collaboration.

Biko argues that the fact that black people for so long were forced to look up to and aspire to the position of whites has made them vulnerable to awe³³. The black psyche, through continuous obliteration of itself (by the social system), has now evolved to accept the perceived 'inherent' differences between whites and blacks. Such acceptance is a result of the adaptation of its expectations and claims, which in turn was informed by the prevailing system history as portrayed by the Apartheid subsystem. For the black sub- system, the white subsystem is far more complex. Therefore, when the black psyche becomes conscious of the fact that the 'apparently inherent' differences are not so apparent (when he sees that the white liberal is treating him equally) it creates confusion because it goes against all that his psyche has produced so far.

Biko thought this would distract the black psyche from the major goal of the movement (total liberation of the blacks from domination by the white minority). Biko argues that the actuality of having tea with whites is envisioned as a great triumph for a psyche that could only dream of such events. It seems, for Biko, that even if the psyche of the white liberal finds it easy to accept and understand that it is actually normal and essential for blacks and whites to sit together and discuss the future of their country, the same is not true for the black psyche. The black psyche, it seems, is overwhelmed by this event and may feel that a lot more has been accomplished than actually has been.

The amount of information that was available to make a difference (to make a system change) was certainly different for black and white South Africans of the 1970s. The sub-standard black education system and Apartheid's plethora of laws that sought to separate

³³ "[Blacks] have been made to feel inferior for so long that for them it is comforting to drink tea, wine or beer with whites who seem to treat them as equals. This serves to boost up their own ego to the extent of making them feel slightly superior to those blacks who do not get similar treatment from whites. These are the sort of blacks who are a danger to the community." (Biko 2004:23)

blacks from whites physically and mentally succeeded enough to make Biko's claim valid. What the black population needed was far more fundamental and serious than the opportunity to sit together with well-meaning white liberals and devise ways of countering the existing system of separation. This is expressed well in Biko's comments on the lack of meaningful action in both blacks and whites³⁴.

As discussed in the theoretical section, systems have the inherent tendency towards adaptation that is crucial for their existence. Among other adaptations, proper definition of boundaries and understanding of the overall ecology ensures their survival. The one thing that a system is always dealing with and trying to minimize is contingency and uncertainty. The apparent lack of action of both blacks and whites could be understood in these terms. What systems try to do is maintain equilibrium with their environment. So were the two subsystems in South Africa. For example, Biko was disheartened over the black labourer that always curses his boss under his breath, but jumped to attention at the first calling of his name. The same is true of white liberals who plan change with blacks, but cannot bring themselves to boycott the whites-only restaurants and beaches.

Although it is undeniable that the needs of both blacks and whites was to transform and change the unilateral control efforts of the Apartheid subsystem, their different adaptation and evolution along with their corresponding environment made things difficult for both. Both systems were trying to reduce as much complexity as possible and reduce the amount of contingency faced. According to Biko, for the non-'liberal' white South African, the

³⁴ "Instead of directing themselves at their black brothers and looking at their common problems from a common platform they choose to sing out their lamentations to an apparently sympathetic audience that has become proficient in saying the chorus of 'shame'" (Biko 2004:23-4)

Apartheid system provided enough “moral explanation for what is happening” so that the fearful or undeveloped psychic system could adapt its claims accordingly (Biko 2004:19).

Biko made his case for rejecting integration on two grounds. First, he could not see integration taking place at any meaningful level when the living conditions of blacks and whites are so starkly different. He argued that true integration forms only organically and cannot be forced, especially in a society where there were obvious psychological and material differences:

[A]s long as blacks are suffering from inferiority complex---a result of 300 years of deliberate oppression, denigration and derision---they will be useless as co-architects of a normal society where man is nothing else but man for his own sake. Hence what is necessary as a prelude to anything else that may come is a very strong grass-roots build-up of black consciousness such that blacks can learn to assert themselves and stake their rightful claim (Biko 2004:21).

What Biko was suggesting from the beginning was that blacks and whites are just not equal in all standards to produce anything meaningful between them. He feared that such integrations will be possible only with “whites talking and blacks listening” and nothing else. This, for Biko, was not acceptable so he advocated the education and re-alignment of the expectations and the claims of his fellow blacks before they could start the integration process.

Discussion: What it all means

So, what does all this mean? During my discussion of Luhmann’s social system’s theory, I’ve discussed the need for the system to remain a system and how this is accomplished through various mechanisms, such as boundary formation and communication with the environment

that results in the co-evolution of the system and the environment from which it obtains its distinction. In addition, such stability is attained through the system's constant reduction of the environment's and its own internal complexity. If the system's internal complexity is too much, or if it cannot deal appropriately with the complexity of the environment, its function will be highly undermined. Luhmann gives the example of the insane mind which is but the inability of the psychic system to differentiate between elements of its own system and the environment – the inability to discern where the system ends and where the environment starts.

What a psychic system does to stay a system is to continue to be conscious of itself through self-reference. It needs to continue being a system and this in turn depends on the continuous communication it has with the environment. In our case, the Apartheid subsystem (which is the environment for the psychic system) has the function of preserving different social systems that come together and occupy the same physical space. Apartheid tried to accomplish this through isolating the different social systems and by setting up boundaries (both physical and otherwise). Accordingly, it generated information and communicates it to all parts of the system.

The information that is generated by the Apartheid subsystem is interpreted exactly the same by the psychic systems in both the black and white social systems. The message is clear: there is sufficient difference between the black and white social systems and there needs to be a structure in place to ensure the continued separation of the two systems. At 'first contact' the evolution of the African system had not reached the Western "guns, germs and steel" level of evolution, therefore, while it catches up to that, it might as well

serve the purpose of supplying the much needed resource upon which the Western system thrives: labour. But this then comes into contradiction with politics.

In such a case, the acceptance of the prevailing system and its functions will be invaluable to ensure the existence of all elements involved. By accepting information as fact and integrating it with the consciousness of the psyche, the psychic system aligns its claims accordingly. Since any move against the system could result in unexpected, possibly unfavourable consequences, the instinct of any system would be to comply and reduce contingencies that might arise by going against the dominating system. Especially where the system has functions that are capable of countering any resistance (for example the use of excessive force by political systems) any attempt at resistance may seem futile to the system that resists it. It is not implausible to assume that such claims would become almost inherent after the coming to pass of a few generations

In South Africa, it was at such a point that Biko intervened. At the risk of his own destruction, Biko tried to change the claims of the black psychic system by infusing it with a different perspective on the information that was used by Apartheid. Biko wanted to bring to the attention of the world (the ecology of both psychic systems and social systems) that the Apartheid social subsystem was systematically removing and blocking opportunities that were needed for the simple transformation of the black social system. His main contention was that the systematic removal and modification of information was keeping the black psyche an adolescent³⁵. Therefore, if the black system was to rise up and be equal or greater than the prevailing system, the current system of separation (Apartheid) needed to be replaced by a system of unification and integration.

³⁵ What Biko refers to as being treated as “perpetual under-16s”

But, why did Biko reject help from the white liberals? He argued that they were not really interested in change because they were comfortable exactly as they were. Biko believed that the only reason they were involved was because their consciousness, witnessing the irrationality of 'separate development', would not let them rest while it witnessed a majority of the system being neglected and actively discriminated against while others (such as themselves) enjoyed a privilege that came not by merit but by birthright – by being born white.

Based on material well-being, the experience of black South Africans was significantly different from the white South Africans. The material discomfort felt by Biko and fellow black South Africans made the need for change very urgent while the same urgency may not have been felt by the white South Africans. There is an argument that material comfort makes a complacent citizen,³⁶ and I can understand Biko's frustration when it came to lack of meaningful action from the white liberals. Is it hard to imagine that the 'active resistance' and 'demonstrations' of the white liberals was almost always followed by retiring to their comfortable homes, most catching a lift home with Mum or Dad?

It can now be concluded that the psychic systems that were informed by the Apartheid social subsystem were produced in two distinct versions. On one hand, the complacent and ignorant whites and blacks of the resulting social system who accepted the need for separation without questioning it; and on the other hand, those who understood the irrationality and sought to do something about it. It is through the latter group that any meaningful change could be introduced to the wider social system. But Biko felt that due to material well being and comfort the urgency for change was not as acute among the whites

³⁶ Bertrand Russell: Conquest of Happiness

as it was among the blacks. Therefore, instead of slowing the whole process down by a joint (black and white) struggle, Biko felt the desired goal could be attained faster if the struggle was separate.

4.2. How Apartheid Could Not Last: The Impossibility of Unilateral Control

Unilateral control (or domination) is possible in self-referencing systems if a snapshot view of a system that is devoid of its temporal element is presented. Such a snapshot does not demonstrate the effects of time and is insufficient to show change in a meaningful way. What time does in the equation of domination is provide the different 'resistance' mechanisms that are present in the system in which a subsystem has managed to exercise a form of unilateral control on another subsystem successfully for some time. From such observations and the basic constructs of systems theory, Luhmann denounced the idea of unilateral control when he wrote:

An important structural consequence that inevitably results from the construction of self-referential systems deserves particular mention. This is *abandoning the idea of unilateral control*. There may be hierarchies, asymmetries, or differences in influence, but no part of the system can control others without itself being subject to control. Under such circumstances, it is possible – indeed in meaning oriented systems highly probable – that any control must be exercised in anticipation of counter control. Securing an asymmetrical structure in spite of this (e.g., in power relationships internal to the system) therefore always requires special precautions (SS. p. 36).

It is these particular 'precautions' that I concentrated on the previous section. My argument was that partial domination could be achieved by exercising such precautions but that it could never amount to being a permanent state of the system. A system is a closed unit and

it depends on its elements and their ability to select the system state for its survival.

Observed at this level, any notion of unilateral or absolute domination is difficult for the system to maintain for long without seriously undermining its own existence.

From the description of self-reference, it has become obvious that the only way such referencing can be carried out is through communication. For Luhmann, there are two prerequisites for communication to take place. These are availability and intelligibility of the information being communicated. Luhmann considers information as a useful function of a system so far as it is able to select the system state: "information occurs whenever a selective event (of an external or internal kind) works selectively with the system, namely, can select the system's states" (SS p.40). Quoting Bateson, Luhmann defines information as the "difference which makes a difference" (ibid). From this, it can be concluded that information is a major function of a system if a system is to change.

Apartheid has been characterized as the complete domination of the black majority by the white minority. Comparatively speaking, the rights enjoyed by blacks were relatively insignificant to that of whites and the black population has suffered a lot in the name of religion and tradition³⁷. Sub-standard education, forced removals, the homelands, bannings, and the lack of political freedoms are all significant in the depiction of the controlling subsystem in full swing³⁸. These show how the Apartheid subsystem was successful in the almost-complete domination of the black population. Such characterization is not only prevalent but so pervasive that to assume any other direction is considered denying the suffering of Apartheid's victims. Accordingly, what Luhmann brings to our attention is the

³⁷ Biko (2004) talks of colonization of the mind by the missionaries.

³⁸ Biko describes at length what the domination looks like under the Apartheid government and its separate development policies (Biko 2004)

fact that there was a resistance. This may sound obvious but the implications are too great to ignore. 'No part of a system can completely dominate another part' is one of the themes (for me) of Luhmann's works (SS p.17-18). There is always resistance.

This manipulation of information and inability to recognize itself as part of a larger world-system signed the death sentence of Apartheid. What the struggle was all about (as far as Biko is concerned anyway) is not something foreign and unnatural to the dominating system. What Biko wanted was for the Apartheid system to extend the same privileges and rights that it professed to all South Africans. Just like Martin Luther King who led the peaceful resistance against the American system that sought to set up boundaries that kept black Americans separate, the underlying plea of Biko was to be recognized as a psychic and social subsystem that is not sufficiently different to warrant such extreme measures of separation. Therefore, in a world that's become increasingly wary of colonialism and other forms of direct control, the actions of the Apartheid subsystem garnered world-wide disapproval³⁹. The economic and other sanctions imposed from outside and the ongoing struggle from within led to the decline and then removal of the separatist subsystem.

In conclusion, complete domination is not a selectable option or even a possibility. As far as Luhmann is concerned, this is not the way a system works. At best, what a system does is annihilate the other system with which it comes into contact and with it the very possibility of resistance. The destruction of a system is the ultimate proof of its resistance and inability to occupy the same space as the system that seeks to oppress it. In addition it is the

³⁹ Orkin, M., et al. (1989) describes at length the sanctions against the South African government that weakened it and led to its ultimate demise.

ultimate proof that Luhmann needs to show such oppression does not and cannot exist in the long term.

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CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

The Apartheid subsystem made it next to impossible for proper communication between blacks and whites to take place (through the different Acts and laws). In doing so, it signed its own destruction long before its eventual collapse. In other words, the attempt at stabilizing a system without proper integration of its subsystems (Apartheid's policy of separation) has led to the decline and eventual fall of the subsystem.

How domination was possible

It is from the perspective of psychic systems in particular (and systems theory in general) that I tried to address the question of why Biko chose to reject the integration of black and liberal white South Africans in the move for liberation, even when they had the same vision of a South Africa free of the separatist policies that plagued it during the times of Apartheid. I argued that the separate development of the two social systems (colonizers and the colonized) that were forced to share the same space, but without the appropriate structures in place to allow integration, has resulted in the formation of unique psychic systems. The development of these psychic systems was instrumental in the creation and maintenance of the Apartheid system.

As a nationalist writer who was trying to awaken and motivate his fellow black people of South Africa, and because of the political nature of his questions, Biko was virtually forbidden to say anything positive about the white social system, or the similarity of the helplessness and fear shared by the psychic systems of both black and white subsystems. Since the Apartheid subsystem relied on the absence of strong organized resistance from

the black subsystem for its survival, what Biko needed was the awakening of his fellow black South Africans to one fact – that the Apartheid method of oppression was not right. It is possible that he could have thought any positive comments about the white system would weaken his argument. It is easy to understand the need for such a focused approach towards the enemy.

The reason Biko rejected the integration of blacks and whites in the struggle against Apartheid was because of his realization that the black psychic system was formed differently to the white psychic system. Even if both were 'deluded' into thinking that their expectations and claims were their birthrights, the form these delusions took was significantly different. Simply speaking, both were deluded by the fact that there is a significant difference between blacks and whites. This difference, it seems, was enough to warrant the separate treatment of a significant proportion of the population and the apparent insulation of the white South Africans against the conditions of the blacks.

This explains the greater complexity of the environment and the desperate attempt of the system to maintain itself. Even with everything in the environment seeking to destroy it, the strength garnered by the black psychic system through the understanding of the ecology and the co-evolution with the environment helped the (psychic) system overcome such temporary difficult situations as Apartheid (environment), until it regrouped and devised a way to properly counter the effects of this environment through conscious reflections.

How domination is not possible

A system is a time bound process of elements and their relations depending on self-reference and communications. In positing that domination does not exist, Luhmann is not denying the temporal existence of such conditions that make possible the 'oppression' or 'domination' of parts of the system by other parts from time to time. What Luhmann is arguing is that there could be no permanence of such a relationship like the permanent structures of a system such as information, communication or a boundary⁴⁰. Luhmann's understanding of 'complete domination' is that of being the major and fixed function in a system (as theorized by others). Such a notion of complete domination as a permanent fixture of a system has no place in Luhmann's conceptualization of social systems. What Luhmann is postulating instead is a position where even if dominance is achieved to an extent and bound-temporally, it does so under the continuous fire of direct (or indirect) resistance from the subsystem that it seeks to dominate.

Luhmann's conceptions of the different functions and conditions for the 'well-being' of a system are good indicators of how domination could be achieved. As noted above, distinctions in the differentiation process compounded by a systematic control of information that perpetuates the state of affairs is a recipe for successful domination. For example, if Apartheid did not have the legacy of the Western social system that armed it with sufficient weapons, the legacy of modernity with its concept of human rights⁴¹, and

⁴⁰ If anything, the reason I dealt at length with Luhmann's theory of social systems is to show how integral each of the elements described are to the system and the system-theoretical understanding of society so that the idea of domination of one part of a system by another can be rejected easily. As compared to the necessity and permanence of such elements as boundaries, communication and adaptation, domination does not have enough structural weight and temporal presence to be given due weight to guarantee such pronouncements as 'complete domination'.

⁴¹ Some argue and I think is valid in this case that human-rights is the product of the modern level of societal differentiation: "the emergence of fundamental freedoms and human rights can be related to the dominant

colonial policies of pseudo-integration it would have been impossible for it to come to exist in the first place. Integration is not a choice (at least in the day and time when the conquistadors are long gone). Social systems that come into contact and do not destroy each other completely in the process cannot help but carry out all their systemic functions (SS p.18)⁴². Such systemic functions as communication and selection result in the modification of the concerned subsystems (e.g., white and black populations in South Africa) and result in changed social system (e.g., South Africa). Attempts at unilateral control (like Apartheid) may appear as long as there is sufficient difference in differentiation but they are unlikely to persist in a time where it is increasingly difficult to control communication and the flow of information.

At the psychic system level, what such understanding of the impossibility of domination does is 'give life' back to the 'completely-oppressed victim' of domination. This understanding and knowledge that there is always a resistance and always a struggle against that subsystem that seeks to undermine the psychic and the social system is a psychic (and social) triumph that is unparalleled and that can be used in the creation and re-creation of new expectations and claims⁴³. This, in turn, will realign the misalignment caused by such systems as the Apartheid subsystem, which had a brief but successful exercise in domination. The ramifications of such a shift in consciousness from "I am oppressed" to "I am resisting oppression" cannot be ignored. With the addition of "resistance" in the

structure of modern society, that is, functional differentiation. Human rights are considered as a social institution, whereby modern society protects its own structure against self-destructive tendencies. By giving inalienable and equal rights to all human beings, society ensures that the differentiation between different functional subsystems is maintained and at the same time institutionalizes specific mechanisms to increase stability and protection of the individual." (Verschraegen 2002:258)

⁴² Luhmann asserts that the only way one can determine the other is by completely annihilating them: "No system can completely determine the system/environment relations of another system save by destroying them" (SS p.18)

⁴³ For Luhmann, the nexus of the psychic system and social system is the *claims* and *expectations* (SS p267-8) .

vocabulary of the black psychic system, the claims and expectations will be modified accordingly. Now, the black is no longer firmly in the camp of the desperate, resigned and compliant, but more in the camp of the hopeful, active and resistant.

The systems approach to social theory

In conclusion, it is worthwhile mentioning the implications of the systems approach for social theory. What Luhmann's social/psychic system theories provide the researcher with is an indication of how societies form and under what circumstances they continue to exist. A deeper look at the theory provides one with a structure through which any social situation can be analyzed. As far as the South African context is concerned, systems theory provides the essential ingredients for understanding the percolation of a new type of social system that has not been possible in previous times. As mentioned before, first contacts between separately differentiated social systems sometimes ended up in the annihilation of one of the systems. This invariably was the case where presumably insurmountable differences plagued the two societies, and the only way any one of the societies could continue to exist was through the annihilation (destruction or forced integration) of the other. The South African example provides the researcher with a scenario where annihilation was not perceived as an option. Regardless of what different theories suggest of the situation in South Africa (such as arguments regarding the need for cheap labour and the preservation of societies) what systems theory provides is a unique perspective where there is no blame or apology. It provides a lens through which all could be perceived simply as the formation of a unique social system that is rich in resources for the further investigation of the function of systems as well as description and prediction of the social system itself.

For Luhmann, it is through such abstractions that system history is made to be more useful. The understanding of how social systems perceived other social systems in their environment a few hundred years ago is witness to how far social systems have developed in terms of dealing with the contingencies of their environments and other social systems in their environment. Such abstraction should give the researcher, the activist, the freedom fighter the encouragement to continue to be catalysts of change and not despair over the apparent stagnation of present circumstances. Accordingly, one of the benefits of the theory of social systems is to provide guidance to the researcher as to what features of society are permanent and which ones are transitory. It warns the researcher not to use transitory features of society as the fundamental basis of analysis and theorization.

Furthermore, the different levels of abstraction provided by Luhmann makes the whole exercise of theorization visible. Since Luhmann is concerned with the very building blocks of a society, depending on how abstract the researcher wants to get, she is provided the meta-theoretical blocks that will help her in the quest for understanding or describing any social-systemic phenomenon. What has been manifest in this paper is the amalgamation of my understanding of Luhmann's theory and that of the current social system in which I live.

Luhmann's theorization helped a great deal in determining what is relevant from the system's memory (history) and how historical consciousness can cloud scientific endeavours such as social theorizations.

Concluding remarks: The Possibility and Impossibility of Luhmann

One of the strengths of social systems theory should be its ability to focus on those changes that Luhmann calls “stabilizing and destabilizing” or “progressive and pathological” (DS p.311) and not fall prey to the ideological needs of the times. Although, as mentioned before, many writers argue that Luhmann is actually motivated ideologically. As far as this paper is concerned, all that Luhmann provided was a way to focus attention on the situations and features in a society that help in its stabilization or de-stabilization. Other writers applaud Luhmann’s endeavour by agreeing that what is needed is just that “...we hope to find the means to an understanding of modern, complex society that will dispense with the nostalgia and pathos prevalent in both the contemporary Left and Right” (Rasch & Wolfe 1995).

Of course, this is no guarantee that such works will not be used in ideological contexts. It is not inconceivable to find creative use of the theory to identify and isolate centralized political and economic powers that exist in the system, the insulation and ambivalence of society that does not feel the needs of its neighbours, and many others. When applied properly, even the ideological use of the theory of social systems makes for a good argument. As discussed in this paper, even the temporary presence of domination could be shown for what it is and advised against long before it is impossible for it to continue.

Most importantly, it needs to be recognized that Luhmann’s theory is not original. It has been developed extensively from different sources of which Parson is but one⁴⁴. Luhmann has used the works of the Venezuelan biologists Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J.

⁴⁴ Misgeld (1994) argues that Luhmann’s theory is nothing but the reformulation of parsons structural functionalism.

Varela and the mathematician Spencer-Brown along with Walter Buckley's adaptation of theory of cybernetics to social systems⁴⁵. Some give credit to Luhmann's theory as being the "first major sociological theory that opts for communication as the constitutive element of society and other social systems" (Stichweh 2000), but it still remains widely a hybrid, drawing on diverse theories.

What Luhmann has tried to do is formulate a kind of "Grand Theory" – one that does not claim to answer all questions⁴⁶. Once one is familiar with the way Luhmann conceptualizes social systems, it becomes almost an involuntary action to see the systemic nature of all facets of life. A better description of events and phenomena could be achieved through such systematic thinking. A look at Luhmann's works attests to the same. Based on his theory of social systems, he was able to write extensively on politics, economy, law, art, and even love⁴⁷.

Such a grand theory does come at a cost. What Luhmann provided is one big "cognitive adventure"⁴⁸. To say it is complicated would be to trivialize it. It is hard to understand at first glance. However, a proper engagement with Luhmann's work demands a sufficiently disinterested and disengaged approach. An attempt to understand every single sentence will almost in all cases fail. Fortunately, he provides well articulated introductions and conclusions to help clarify the readings. I believe the reason many fail to understand Luhmann is probably due to their pre-conceived ideas and their focus on a particular type of

⁴⁵ From the introduction to his *Social Systems* (SS 1995)

⁴⁶ "What Luhmann offers is a theory of society, a 'grand theory' in the European tradition, but one which runs directly contrary to the claims for universal competence and exhaustive accounts of reality associated with 'grand theories'. It is a theory which acknowledges modestly that it cannot answer many of the important questions that face modern societies." (King & Anton Schutz 1994:261)

⁴⁷ Luhmann is a prolific writer who wrote more than 30 books on various subjects.

⁴⁸ "A serious engagement with Luhmann's theory is always a cognitive adventure, and one will never know at the start where it will end. It seems certain to me that one learns a great deal from this adventure, even if it is only to learn how fraught with uncertainty scientific knowledge is." (Müller & Larson Powell 1994:54)

information. It is my experience that if one has the privilege to try and understand Luhmann in Luhmann's own terms; it is the most rewarding experience, albeit fraught with paradoxes and complexities⁴⁹.

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⁴⁹ "Luhmann is in search of an epistemologically consistent - and that means unavoidably paradoxical - theory of the evolution and function of social systems." (Rasch 1994:376)

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