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# World Politics and Conflict Systems: The Communication of a "No" and its Effects

*Summary*

In this article I discuss, from a systems theoretical perspective, the relationship between the system of world politics, on the one hand, and conflict understood as a social system in its own right, on the other. I argue more specifically that in contrast to an explicit or implicit assumption in most IR scholarship, conflicts can best be understood as complex and self-reproducing social systems. Conflicts are, theoretically speaking, not part of the world political system. They are, rather, an external "irritation" to which the (world) political system constantly has to relate, sometimes absorbing these conflicts, sometimes being absorbed by them. While world politics is full of conflicts, the emergence and evolution of conflicts is unfolding independently of, yet also in a process of structural coupling with, world politics. The article is divided into three main sections in which I discuss, (1) the centrality of conflicts in world politics, (2) the systems theoretical take on conflicts, and (3) the realms of applicability for a theoretically guided study of order (*Herrschaft*) and contestations to order in world politics.

## POLITYKA ŚWIATOWA A SYSTEMY KONFLIKTU: KOMUNIKACJA „NIE" I JEJ EFEKTY

*Streszczenie*

W artykule tym omawiam w perspektywie teorii systemów relację pomiędzy systemem światowej polityki a konfliktami rozumianymi jako autonomiczne systemy społeczne. Dowodzę w szczególności, że wbrew założeniom przyjmowanym *explicite* lub *implicite* przez większość teoretyków stosunków międzynarodowych konflikty należy ujmować jako kompleksowe, autoreprodukujące systemy społeczne. Konflikty nie są, teoretycznie rzecz ujmując, częścią światowego systemu politycznego. Są one raczej zewnętrzną "irytacją", do której (światowy) system polityczny musi się stale odnosić, w niektórych przypadkach absorbując te konflikty, a w innych – będąc przez nie absorbowanym. Co prawda światowa polityka jest pełna konfliktów, jednak powstają one i rozwijają się niezależnie od światowej polityki (choć równocześnie w procesie strukturalnego sprzężenia z nią). Artykuł składa się z trzech głównych części, w których omawiam 1) centralne znaczenie konfliktów w światowej polityce, 2) teorio--systemowe ujęcie konfliktów oraz 3) obszary stosowalności teoretycznie ukierunkowanych badań nad porządkami panowania i ich kontestacją w światowej polityce.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Are conflicts part of the world political system or are they something external to that system? At first, this might seem a rather odd question to ask – are world politics not full of conflicts? Is it not true that world politics is, in a way, defined by ever-lasting conflicts between nations, ideologies, civilizations, religions, and ethno-national groups? Is not the international system as a whole an anarchical realm in which ultimately each of these entities is each other's wolf? As I like to show in this article, by drawing from modern systems theory, there is more

to this question about the inter-relationship between world politics and conflicts than might initially meet the eye, at least the eye of somebody trained observing world politics from a traditional International Relations (IR) perspective. In contrast, and as I discuss this in further detail below, modern systems theory offers an intriguing fresh theoretical perspectives on this question about the inter-relationship between (world) politics and conflicts. These perspectives not only elucidate new conceptual insights on the conflicts/politics interface as two separate, but structurally coupled, social systems. They also open new avenues to the study of the historical evolution of world politics, phenomenologically speaking.

Let me start with a disclaimer here. It is obvious that the world of (world) politics is full of conflicts, and the academic discipline devoted to the study of world politics, namely IR, is rightfully characterized by a wealth of elaborated theories that define conflict, violence, and war as defining features of the world political order. I do thus, of course, not argue that conflicts are irrelevant to world politics. Quite the contrary, they are indeed a central feature, both empirically and theoretically. Yet, I do argue that both structural and agency-centered theories as well as mainstream positivist and constructivist ontologies in IR, notwithstanding all their obvious merits, tend to underestimate the "autonomous" features of conflicts understood as social phenomena in their own right. Drawing from classical theories of conflict in sociology, in particular in Georg Simmel, as well as from modern system theory I argue that in contrast to an explicit or implicit assumption in most IR scholarship, conflicts can best be understood as complex and self-reproducing social systems. To be even more nuanced here: conflicts are, theoretically speaking, not part of the world political system. They rather are an external "irritation" to which the (world) political system constantly has to relate, sometimes absorbing these conflicts, sometimes being absorbed by them. In a nutshell my key argument is that while world politics are full of conflicts, the emergence and evolution of conflicts is unfolding independently of, yet in a process of structural coupling with, world politics.

## 2. CONFLICTS IN WORLD POLITICS

The world of (world) politics is full of conflicts. This is not only true in relation to non-violent issue conflicts such as, say, fierce trade disputes, such as "beef wars" or "banana wars" in the context of the World Trade Organization (WTO), or debates in the context of the United Nations (UN) on whether global warming is human-made or not and how the world community should tackle this problem. It is, of course, also true for the countless examples of openly violent conflicts, as well as the many conflicts in which parties threaten each other to the extent that they are willing to resort to violence. We find such recourse to violence, or the threat thereof, in conflicts occurring at all of the various "levels" of world politics.[1] Thus, as far as the global level is concerned, the two World Wars, the Cold War or currently the global "war" on terror serve as good examples. There are also intense conflict dynamics at the regional level, e.g. the battle between Arab states, Iran, Israel, Turkey, and various non-state actors for Middle East intra-regional hegemony in the post-Arab spring era. While inter-state wars are today less important than they were a few decades ago, they do still occur, as the example of the Georgian--Russian war of 2008 illustrates. Moreover, relations between states in many world regions are still today characterized by a lack of cooperation, recourse to threats of violence or even the blunt execution of violence, e.g. historically between Algeria and Morocco or currently between Russia and Ukraine. The bulk of openly violent conflicts that shape contemporary world society are, then, ethno-national conflicts with a trans-boundary dimension, such as the civil wars in Libya and Syria, the conflicts in Congo and Sierra Leone, or the high intensity of violence that characterizes Central American states such as El Salvador and Honduras [see only HIIK 2014; Wimmer 2002]. Moreover, not

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1      I refer in this chapter to world politics when referring to politics as a social system. It is a world political system insofar as modernity's functionally differentiated systems are part of globalized world society [Luhmann 1998]. In its communicative operation this system resorts to the notion of various levels in order to make sense of world politics, such as the global (e.g. UN, Ebola as global pandemic), regional (e.g. EU, Central American conflicts), national (e.g. Switzerland, Qatari influence), and local levels (e.g. normal people, the power of the everyday).

only the actual conflict parties are part of such conflict settings, but more often than not also actors from within and outside the respective world regions. These external actors often play a central role in keeping these conflicts alive. The flow of arms, ideologies, political support networks, and money that keeps many violent conflicts going is, in the context of today's world society, usually global in outlook [Kaldor 2013]. And, finally, these conflicts are also played out vis-à-vis a world-wide audience that observes, categorizes and compares these conflicts. One only needs to think here of the legions of scholars and journalists writing about specific conflicts, about ordinary people watching or reading "breaking news" on them, or about think tanks as well as private or international organizations that specialize in providing analytical frames of how to "best" understand and solve these conflicts [see Moussa Nabo and Stetter 2012].

But conflicts are not only a defining feature of world politics from such a phenomenological perspective. Theories of world politics in IR are often built on notions of an inherently conflictive global system. They thus consider conflicts as a building bloc of world political order – in other words, they do not distinguish, on a systemic level, between conflicts and politics. Both dynamics are considered part of the same realm, the borders between politics and conflicts are fuzzy, blurred and from a conceptual angle largely uncharted. Thus, for most theoretical scholarship in IR and as far as theories of world political order are concerned, conflicts are not a phenomenon worth being studied due to their own systemic features but rather due to their explanatory value for better understanding the way in which the system in which they occur, namely *international relations* (in classical IR terminology), operates. It is not the purpose of this article to elaborate on that claim at length. It should suffice here to say that according to the classical English School and Waltzian Neo-Realism, two particularly influential IR theories, world politics unfold in an anarchical international system structurally shaped by conflicts. Thus, both theories assert that within an anarchical space conflicts – be it as a direct consequence of self-help by states (neo-Realism) or as resulting from the legitimacy of exerting violence in an inter-state system (English School) – play a central role in defining the system's properties [the classical texts are Waltz 2010; Bull 2002]. Alexander Wendt's [1999] social constructivism then highlights

different cultures of anarchy, comprising both conflict-prone and cooperative sets of relations, yet a Hobbesian culture of conflict and antagonisms is one concrete manifestation of world politics, at least until a more integrated world state will emerge [Wendt 2003]. Neither Wendt, nor Waltz or the English School distinguish, theoretically speaking, between the world political system, on the one hand, and conflicts as a social form different from politics, on the other. Finally, liberal-institutionalist theories of IR assume, with a counter-factual twist, that conflicts are pivotal to world politics precisely because so much of the contemporary institutional order of world politics has been designed with a view to managing and, if possible, terminating conflicts from the global to the regional and local levels. One only needs to think here of the reasons why international organizations such as the UN, the EU, the OSCE and the African Union have been established or why countless international (legal) regimes regulating disarmament and arms control as well as international humanitarian law as a whole pervade the contemporary institutional order of world politics. However, also in this school of thought we do not find an extended theoretical discussion of the systemic properties of politics and conflict, and to what degree they overlap or differ.

## 3. CONFLICTS: A SYSTEMS THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Modern systems theory, building on insights first generated in "classical" fin-de-siècle sociology, offers a somewhat different perspective on conflicts – one that is, as I shall discuss in the subsequent section, also helpful in discussing conflicts in world politics. Building on a tradition dating back to the seminal article on *Der Streit* [The Dispute] by sociologist Georg Simmel, originally published in 1908, modern systems theory highlights the self-reproducing features of conflict [Simmel 1908]. These features render "conflict" a unique *social* form, different from politics as well as other social spheres in which such conflicts occur. Social conflicts are, according to this sociological perspective, an integral and important part of social life rather than a pathology that can be overcome [see also Mouffe 2013]. Moreover, conflicts emerge and unfold on the basis of specific features that are independent from the social setting in which they occur. To give one

example here: although the world political system is full of conflicts, a systems theoretical perspective shows that conflicts – their emergence and evolution – is not part of that system's self-reproduction but a social regularity that adheres to its own systemic patterns of differentiation [see in detail Luhmann 1984, p. 488-550]. In other words, addressing conflicts as a social form allows for the detection of the genuine and generalizable dynamics of conflicts irrespective of the social setting in which they occur. When focusing on the form of conflict, a heated dispute over the next holiday destination in a family convening at the kitchen table is, systemically speaking, based on the same communicative patterns of differentiation as, say, an ideological stalemate between political parties in the Danish parliament debating over the next health care reform package, or tough bargaining about the prize between a vendor and a buyer at a Middle Eastern vegetable market who cannot agree, or quarrels in the context of the border dispute between Greek and Turkish Cypriots – all these examples are about the on-going communication of a "no" in relation to a "no" uttered by the Other. In the tradition of Simmel, social conflicts do not only have a shared form, there is also a shared function of conflicts. More precisely, conflicts lead to societation [*Vergesellschaftung*] by creating a shared identity between antagonists which, the longer a conflict endures, define their social positioning in (antagonistic) relation to the other and in relation to a "shared" good they both aspire to [see also Coser 1964]. Also the identities and subject positions of conflict parties in world politics, including the (constructed) meaning they give to conflict objects (e.g. territory, populations, natural resources, etc.) thereby become shaped and stabilized through conflicts. They are emergent phenomena, rather than preceding conflicts in a primordial manner. Conflict actors and conflict themes do not predate the conflict that discursively shapes them.

In his seminal oeuvre *Social Systems*, originally published in 1984, Niklas Luhmann has built on these insights of classical sociology and has highlighted the complex, self-reproducing and non-human features of conflicts as a social form – or, in systems theoretical parlance, of conflict as a social system. Conflicts are defined as the recursive rejection of communication offers, the repeated communication of a "no" – and that is what puts conflicts as a social system in opposition to other social systems, such as politics, the economy or science. Note

here that the purpose of various media of communication, such as *power* in the political system, *money* in the economy or *truth* in science, is to ensure acceptance of and recursivity between communication offers in the light of countless alternatives [Luhmann 1998, p. 316-331]. As long as recursivity between communications based on a specific media is ensured, a system endures. Media of communication thus transform improbabilities into probabilities by creating the societal expectation that communication offers are accepted, a "yes" is communicated, e.g. because power is considered legitimate or at least so threatening that its (il-)legitimacy remains uncontested, because a proper price is offered or because scientific forms of evidence are piled up to back-up truth claims. Conflicts as a social system differ from this "yes"-based logic of recursivity.[2] In conflict settings, the expectation that communication offers are accepted is reversed. In other words, the self-reproduction of conflicts crucially depends on the expectation that communication offers are *not* accepted. The constant communication of a "no" forms the discursive ground on which conflicts as communicatively self-reproducing systems emerge and evolve [see Stetter 2008, p. 141-170].

Following Simmel, Luhmann [1984] highlights three specific features of conflicts. Firstly, conflicts, i.e. the communicative recursivity between one "no" and another, are "parasitic." This means that conflicts emerge and unfold not in isolation to but in close relation to specific and concrete social structures. For example, within the context of politics, conflicts emerge in all those instances in which the communication of power [i.e. the implicit threat to violence underpinning all political communications, see Stetter 2008, p. 69-81] does not encounter the expected obedience but opposition and contestation. In other words, conflicts are a social system that is structurally coupled to other social systems such as *inter alia* (world) politics, but also organizations and interaction-systems. Secondly, by disrupting the flow of communications within a social system – i.e. by shifting the horizon of expectations from "yes" to "no" – conflicts

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2    See also footnote 3 below on the distinction between yes/no recursivitiy, on the one hand, and the distinction between the positive and negative side of a code, on the other. I do though claim that there is a symbiotic relation in particular between recursive no's (a conflict system) and the negative side of a code (e.g. powerlessness in the political system).

are pivotal in protecting social systems from becoming static. The "no" enables a system to test alternatives to established orders and questions entrenched ways of doing "things" within that system, the "no" prevents the reification of social structures, e.g. existing power--relations in the world political system. The function of conflicts is, thus, to facilitate the evolution of society (and a given system) and to counteract stasis [see Luhmann 1998, p. 456-504]. That is why Luhmann [1984] has referred to conflicts as the "immune-system" of society, echoing claims originally made by Simmel about the pivotal contribution of conflicts in society's constant transformation.[3]

Thirdly, due to their inherent tendency to escalate, conflicts might, however, overarch media-based communications within social systems, thereby "absorbing" their host system [Luhmann 1984]. They are no longer functioning as an immune-system but as a threat to a given system's actual state-of-being, be it a couple that gets absorbed in quarrels (i.e. an interaction system), a state at the brink of civil war (i.e. an organization) or a social system that risks getting absorbed by conflicts. We find such escalations in all those cases in which the general expectation within a social system – be it an interaction system, an organization or a social system – that a communication encounters a "yes" becomes superseded by the general expectation that subsequent communication offers will *not* be accepted. This might, in the case conflict-prone communications extend over longer periods of time, in relation to the manifold social identities and various issue-areas – i.e. the temporal, social and substantive dimensions of meaning of each communication [Luhmann 1984, p. 112] – severely inhibit the ability of social systems to continue to perform their primary functions. In the context of world politics we can find such a constellation in many of the world's hotspot conflicts regions. In many of these regions, the intensity of conflict is so high, that virtually no societal realm, from the level of private interactions, to the functioning of organizations to the operation of broader political, economic, cultural, and religious dynamics, stays

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3    This distinction [see Luhmann 1984, p. 533] between conflicts being parastic and constituting an immune-system of society underpins the arguments further below in this article on the role and function of conflicts in world politics too.

immune to conflict imperatives [Stetter 2007b]. Conflicts, then, easily become self-perpetuating and expansionist in relation to other social systems, e.g. politics, the economy, or religion. Even interventions by seemingly neutral actors, such as the UN or outside powers with no major conflict-related stakes in these regions, then tend to spark new conflict dynamics rather than solving the conflict at hand. This is a phenomenon not only known from political conflict zones, e.g. in Sub-Saharan Africa, Central America or the Middle East, but from private family feuds as well, in which "neutral" friends or relatives easily become absorbed by conflict dynamics, often having to chose either side over the other the more intense such conflicts become. Such regional conflicts do, of course, not remain confined to regional levels; they easily migrate to other levels, such as the global and the local. For example, the antagonistic features of Middle East conflicts are replicated at global levels: the UN is preoccupied with managing this conflict, suggesting solutions, regional conflict parties seek extra-regional allies and reach out to world-wide publics in order to foster their cause. What is, however, less likely (apart from a world--wide nuclear war or an alien invasion threatening the whole of humankind) is that the entire system of world politics gets absorbed by conflict dynamics. There is too much only loosely coupled communication occurring in that system at any given moment to render likely such an all-encompassing orientation in relation to a defining "no"-expectation.

Building on Simmel and Luhmann, Heinz Messmer [2003, p. 2007] has developed a highly elaborated systems theoretical account of the emergence and evolution of conflict systems. More specifically, Messmer has studied the communicative dynamics underlying the internal differentiation of conflicts. Messmer's conflict theory builds on the notion of four basic conflict stages, namely conflict episodes, issue conflicts, relational conflicts and power conflicts – the latter two stages also figuring in some literature as identity conflicts and subordination conflicts [see Diez et al. 2006, Stetter 2008]. Conflict episodes occur in those cases in which a rejection of a communication offer encounters a "no" [see in the following Messmer 2003; 2007]. In other words, the most basic form of conflict is a triangular recursivity between an initial communication offer, its rejection and a rejection of this rejection. A conflict as an emergent phenomenon

thus requires a double form of rejection, e.g. when Alter asks Ego to go to the cinema tonight, Ego states a preference for going to the gym, and Alter then responds by saying, "I don't want you to go there, join me for the film." Conflict episodes are a ubiquitous phenomenon and occur in social systems, organizations as well as in personal interactions countless times. By resorting to experimental data, Messmer showed that conflict episodes are usually just that, episodes. After a few turns in which the parties involved resort to the communication of a "no," they suddenly end the conflict. Often the conflict is not solved directly, but the parties simply stop talking about the contested issue, talk about something else or simply physically (and discursively) disengage. No communication, no conflict. The recursivity between one "no" and another is in all these cases dissociated. The function of conflict episodes is thus not so much to arrive at a consensus or win an argument over the other but rather to demarcate the social position of the Self. Messmer's arguments are also highly useful in understanding why conflicts, in particular intensive conflicts at the stage of subordination conflicts, are not the "end" of communication, but that the alternative of communicating a "no" always is, as long as such communications continue, a connective communication (*Anschlusskommunikation*). Conflict parties – e.g. Israelis and Palestinians – must not be brought to talk to each other, as this is a popular slogan amongst politicians and opinion-shapers. They do so and intensively so during periods of massive violence directed against each other. What external mediators actually mean is that the connective communication should change from a structural expectation of a "no" towards some "yes"-related communication, e.g. orientation of communications in relation to a guiding principle such as peaceful conflict transformation.

This changes at the stage of issue conflicts. The rejection of communication offers in relation to a contested "thing" both sides disagree about serves to stabilize the situation. Both sides encounter a constant "no," the recursivity of the "no" is formally established. Both sides argue and try to convince the other that their position is correct and should define the subsequent courses of action and reasoning. The social relation is, however, at the stage of an issue conflict still intact. Rather than attributing (bad) motives to the other, both sides consider each other being part of a joint social space, occupying a shared

normative universe and mutually consider themselves open to objective reasoning. In other words, they do not perceive each other as conflict parties. The shared belief in the power of the better argument, to paraphrase Habermas, is structuring this type of conflict, including the readiness to seek some kind of compromise and consensus, i.e. not to insists by all means on the own standpoint. An issue conflict can endure over longer stretches of time, e.g. between Atlanticists and Europeanists who for more than half a century now agree to disagree and debate about the precise way to reconcile European-American security cooperation and Europe's own security architecture, but still consider themselves being part of the same security community. Thus, the adversaries do not consider themselves as foes but merely as subjects holding competing, yet legitimate substantive positions on a given issue. At the third stage, the level of identity conflicts (or relational conflicts) the social dimension of meaning then enters the equation. The fact that communication offers encounter a constant "no" – and the "necessity" to object to the intransigent positions brought up by the Other – now renders the social dimension of meaning – and not only the issue dimension of meaning – pivotal. If the other side is not convinced by the better argument, there must be something obscure and potentially wrong with the personality of the Other. The Other's objection is not due to convincing substantive reasons it can bring forward, but results from bad intentions or some other defect of its personality. Often endless speculations about the "real" intentions and motives of the other become central at this stage of conflict differentiation too – as many conflicts of this type in world politics document in which conflict parties speculate about the motives of the other side very much like disappointed (ex-) – lovers, e.g. Russians speculating about the "real" motives of the USA, Germans trying to imagine what Russian president Putin really believes, or Middle East scholars debating what the real intentions of the government of Qatar are when heavily intervening in many post-Arab spring countries. At this stage the general expectation indeed tends to shift from an expectation that sooner or later communication offers are accepted and mediated by specific media of communications that favour the "yes" over the "no," towards an expectation that subsequent communication offers will also be rejected because of the ultimately bad intentions held by the other.

Communication becomes increasingly locked-in and centred around the "no." Arguing gives way to accusations and negative statements about the identity of the other. This facilitates the self-perpetuation of the conflict by stabilizing the (antagonistic) identities of the conflict parties – a good recipe to ensure future rejections of communication offers simply because they come from the other side. At the stage of identity conflict, conflicts thus firmly stabilize as autonomous, self-reproducing social systems. The final stage then is the level of subordination conflicts (or power conflicts). Since neither arguing nor accusations help in overcoming the objections made by the Other, conflict parties consider actual recourse to violence or the threat of exerting violence as the only way left to overcome the intransigent opposition by the other. Violence thus becomes legitimized and the surrender of the Other, the permanent subordination of the Other, because it constitutes a lethal threat, or even the extermination of the Other turn into part and parcel of conflict communication. As in the famous Highlander movie, "there can only be one" becomes the motto of this ultimate stage of conflict differentiation.

As these insights from Simmel, Luhmann and Messmer show, conflicts are social systems, yet they are not functionally differentiated social systems like politics, law, the economy, etc. In conflicts, there is no differentiation into different forms of the "no" as there is a differentiation of various forms of the "yes" in relation to the *different* media of communication defining function systems (or also stratified and segmentary systems), such as power, money, truth, class/caste or community [Luhmann 1998, p. 332-358]. Conflicts do not occur independently of a given social context but are structurally coupled to specific systems prevalent within society. Conflicts, in other words, do not emerge and evolve independently of broader societal differentiation. This necessitates taking the environment of conflicts into consideration when specifying a conflict's systemic features, e.g. the way conflicts are coupled with the world political system. Analogous to what has been argued above, three main elements of this coupling between conflicts (system) and other social system (a conflict's environment, e.g. the world political system) can be discerned. Firstly, conflicts are ubiquitous within the political system and do not necessarily colonialize power-based communications. Thus, on the level of conflict episodes and issue conflicts the communication

of a "no" does not fundamentally challenge concrete systems of rule and governance. Expectations about legitimate or factual rule remain intact but so does the general set-up of communication as offering both the possibility to utter a "yes" or a "no." The "yes" is structurally privileged, but the system offers ample opportunities to utter a "no" and demarcate social positions, e.g. through institutionalizing an opposition or mass media with different ideological orientations or a benevolent autocratic ruler who does not decapitate an advisor immediately if s/he utters an alternative opinion.

Secondly, there is a systemic necessity to cultivate conflicts within a given social system, such as politics, due to the aforementioned "immune-function" the communication of a "no" offers to its host system. A host system, such as politics, can select and test alternatives and is open to variation and new forms of restabilization. In short, the system can evolve, which requires change that would not simply occur if power-based communication offers would automatically be accepted all the time. If this were the case those leaders or ideologies once in power would also remain in that position; we would therefore still be ruled by a Pharaoh and by a belief in divine providence, and neither the belief in "state sovereignty" nor in "human rights" would have become defining features of the constitutional structure of world politics. While such variations and new selections underpin the history of politics from the onset of human civilization, conflicts become arguably more dynamic since modernity took off [see also Luhmann 1984, p. 550]. Thus, in the modern era, triggered by revolutions in communication technology since the 15th century (e.g. book printing, telegraph, cross-continental telephone cables, long-distance flights, satellite television, internet, etc.) the likelihood of communicating a "no" arguably increases, within the political systems and beyond, both due to the absolute increase of communications on a global scale and due to the more impersonal ways of communicating a "yes," but in particular a "no." Martin Luther put his 95 theses on paper – making use of the printing press – and did not rely on trusting that a direct, personal interaction with Church authorities when uttering a "no" alone would do the job.

Thirdly, conflicts can however easily transform from being a gentle regulator of gradual evolution of a given social system and turn into societal super-structure in their own right. Conflicts then absorb

their host system(s). As argued above, all conflicts have an inherent tendency to escalate, thereby absorbing more and more social processes in their environment into their systemic division of the world into a benevolent Self and a malevolent Other. This becomes visible in particular in relation to systemic forms of inclusion (of the Self) and exclusion (of the Other) across various social systems, a phenomenon characterized as chain inclusions/exclusions that lead to a deep antagonization of social identities across social systems [see Stetter 2008]. To pick one example: if parts of the political system become structurally defined by intense forms of conflict – e.g. the perception of an all-defining conflict over power between Shia and Sunni in Middle East politics – then identity issues become the main battleground of (regional) politics – and become, as highlighted above, replicated at the global level by shaping imaginaries of this conflict and the necessity of responding to it at the UN headquarters, op-ed articles in newspapers with a global circulation, foreign ministries in Paris and London, and so on. That is why I have argued elsewhere, that the Middle East is not a geographically confined region (although such confinements are an important part of political communication), but that the Middle East "is whenever and wherever it is communicated" [Stetter 2008, p. 21]. The distribution of power becomes "frozen," the line between power and powerlessness turns into a "frozen crossing" in the sense that those who possess power try to defend it by all means, fearing that the Other would subordinate them if they rose to power. And those who are being or feeling suppressed resort to "hot contestations" trying to overthrow those in power – of course, the reality of such conflicts being that all sides feel at some point threatened and surrounded by suspiciously strong adversaries [on frozen crossings and hot contestations see Stetter 2008]. Over time, the perception of politics as being defined, in relation to almost all possible issues, by a strict and adversarial division between Self and Other, overarches political communications. Also external interventions are then usually perceived as either supportive of the Self or the Other, but hardly ever as really neutral. This antagonistic structure of political conflicts then easily spreads to other social realms. Those in power – i.e. those included – try to ensure that their respective identity group is included in the labour market, the army and security apparatuses, the educational system, the health system etc. – whereas

the Other is excluded or at least not actively supported in having access to such societal spheres. Chain inclusions of some and chain exclusions of Others across social systems is thus a defining feature of originally political conflicts in many parts of the world, e.g. the Middle East where national but also the larger regional levels often exhibit such strict and identity-based forms of inclusion of some and exclusion of other. Society as a whole becomes entrenched into the binary logic of conflict, and social systems reveal significant defects in building up complexity. That is why Luhmann has rightly argued that inclusion/exclusion might, at least in some parts of the world, turn into a form of differentiation that supersedes functional differentiation as the primary form of differentiation in contemporary world society – a claim echoed by Wallerstein's dictum that identity has become the cultural battleground of modernity [Luhmann 1998, p. 618-633; Wallerstein 1990].

## 4. WORLD ORDER, WORLD CONFLICTS: A WORLD SOCIETY PERSPECTIVE

Notwithstanding the merits that a system theoretical perspective on the internal differentiation of conflicts and their relation to the societal environment might (or might not) have, the analysis so far has intentionally laid out a rather abstract depiction of the communicative underpinnings of conflicts. Since conflict systems do, however, not unfold in isolation to concrete societal structures but evolve as "parasites" of such structures, an analysis of conflict dynamics is well advised to address both the systemic differentiation of conflicts and how this differentiation relates to and affects a conflict's concrete societal environment. That is why in the remainder of this article, I will reflect on the question how the systemic features of conflicts relate to a particular important societal sphere in which conflicts unfold, namely world politics.

Relating "systems-slang" is, of course, not anathema to IR. In IR, systems-metaphors are central to some of the discipline's most pertinent theories that have been mentioned in section 2, such as the English School, Waltzian neo-realism and Wendt's cultural theory of politics. However, as Jochen Walter [2005] has argued, the bulk of

system-based concepts and metaphors in IR, including these theo-
ries, draw from a somewhat problematic reading of systems in the
tradition of General Systems Theory and Cybernetics. More precisely,
when talking about the international system, most IR theories resort
to a mechanic-technicist understanding of what a system is. The
(international) system IR talks about operates in some way like what
Heinz von Foerster [see 1984] defines as a trivial machine, i.e. a sys-
tem that is composed of given rather than contingent, self-observing,
evolutionary units (in this case states), that is based on ahistorical, i.e.
eternal rules (in this case, anarchy as a constant "input" over time)
and a high degree of predictability of how units behave (e.g. maximiz-
ing security as being the expected behavioral "output" of states). In
short, the understanding of systems in IR is trivial insofar as the basic
structure of this system and the behavior of units therein are largely
immune to change, and a given input triggers an expected output.
A systems theoretical approach takes a different, evolutionary ap-
proach and regards communication-based social systems, such as the
system of (world) politics, as an essentially non-trivial machine [see
Luhmann 1998]. It is a system that constantly changes and evolves
in a contingent manner – and within which conflicts are an impor-
tant discursive mechanism, which ignites such contingent change,
including changing unit and system-propositions resulting from the
fact that while operating (first-order observations) these observers
(i.e. the systems as a whole or actors therein) observe these observa-
tions – yet a mechanism that is due to its communicative properties
is different from the systemic operations of politics.

What has a system theoretical, communication-based approach
to offer to the study of the inter-relationship between (world) poli-
tics and conflicts apart from this focus on evolution and contingent
change? A systems theoretical perspective also elucidates why it is
problematic to conceptualize the international system (in IR jargon)
as a "conflictive" system as key IR theories do when they place an-
archy at the centre of their analysis. Probably the most established
version of this equation of politics and conflicts beyond IR is Carl
von Clausewitz' dictum of war as the extension of politics by other
means. A system theoretical perspective highlights that the assump-
tion of a straightforward continuum between politics and conflicts
conceals rather than reveals key features of both societal realms. War

is not politics, but a specific form of social conflict [see Messmer 2003, p. 225-274; Matuszek 2007], being characterized by communications of "no" at a higher stage of conflict escalation, i.e. the stage of a subordination conflict in which the recourse to violence, the silencing or even physical extermination of the Other is considered legitimate and, indeed, unavoidable. In war and other excesses of violence it becomes the guiding expectation that communication offers are not only constantly rejected by the Other but that the very Self is existentially threatened by the presence of the Other. In other words, the continuation of the conflict, and war being a specific form of conflict, depends on the continued and recursive communication of a "no," e.g. being violently attacked by the Other and attacking the Other in turn too, awaiting the Other's response in order to respond again, and so on. It is precisely on that level that conflicts differ from politics.

Politics and conflicts are *different* social forms that are based on *different* ways through which connectivity of and recursivity between communications is ensured. While conflicts depend on the expectation of a constant rejection of communication offers, the system of politics, based on the medium of power, privileges the structural expectation of a "yes" to communication offers, politics is about building systems of hegemony, rule and authority, i.e. the restabilization of connectivity between "yes"-communications linked to specific, yet contingent power differentials. Politics is characterized by the guiding expectation that a shared belief in the legitimacy of a given type of rule and authority (*Herrschaft*) in world politics, be it charismatic (e.g. John Paul II, Che Guevara), traditional (e.g. the recourse to an allegedly inherited principle, such as sovereignty, territoriality or, more recently, environmental sustainability) or bureaucratic rule (e.g. Charter VII of the UN-Charta, EU Treaty), is able to secure obedience and compliance, at least for some time. Conflicts disturb this smooth operation of established power relations. Conflicts are, in other words, an environmental irritation to power-based communications, i.e. something, which is not produced by the system itself but which is observed by the system as an external "irritation," reminding the system that power could *always* be allocated differently [see Stetter 2008, p. 73-81], a different charismatic leader (e.g. JFK not de Gaulle), a different normative principle (e.g. multilateralism instead of bilateralism) or a different bureaucratic principle (e.g. devolution from supranational organizations

to nation-states as organizations). Seen from that perspective, the heavy focus on anarchy in key IR theories is problematic because it purports the assumption of a system in which it becomes the almost natural thing for actors, aka states, to utter "no," and for this to be the result of their insecurity about the motives of others. This is not to argue that such conflictive dynamics are negligible. Quite to the contrary, mistrust about motives and almost instinctive rejection of demands by other actors is a widespread form of behavior in world politics. However, precisely because conflicts – understood as the recursive communication of "no" – differs from political communication, the focus on anarchy is not only proof of IR's detachment from social theory [Stetter 2013]. It also detracts IR from systematically theorizing forms of hegemony, rule and authority as well as order in world politics, on the one hand, and to get familiar with the idea that "international relations" is firmly embedded in much broader world societal structures, on the other.

As is the case with conflicts in other social systems, also in the system of (world) politics conflicts operate as a parasitic form. Thus, while being two distinct social systems, conflicts and politics – or conflicts and other social systems more generally speaking – stand in a relation of tight structural coupling with each other. That is why it appears to many theorists of politics (or of the economy, organization, or interaction system) that conflicts are everywhere. And in a way conflicts are indeed everywhere. They remind their respective host system that it can change – and that it must change in order to adapt to an ever-evolving and complex world societal environment. Indeed, spontaneous communications of a "no" occur a multitude of times within a given system; they are usually unrecognized variations to the established way of doing "things" in the system. Most of them never lead to further selections – a "no" is often forgotten. Conflict episodes are thus mundane, everyday variations constantly faced by a system. But this does not tell us much about the societal impact of such variations. I suggest that such variations can lead to two types of selection, which can be coined positive and negative selections, which document the theoretical bifurcation that has to be made in relation to politics and conflicts.[4]

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4    Positive (and negative) selections are not normative concepts. In system theoretical parlance the positive side of the code is focused on connectivity,

The first type of selection, namely positive selection, is triggered by those variations, which in the case of the world political system lead to new power constellations. Such variations can originate from all possible directions, such as the rise of a new potential leader, a fashionable ideology, a new technology, a change in economic dynamics, an alternative religious trend or, simply, a random "no" that somehow challenges the status quo. If such variations in the form of an unexpected "no" to entrenched forms of power lead to new selections that subsequently guide the horizons of expectations in political communications then a positive selection has occurred, e.g. the rise of a new charismatic leader or a new normative or bureaucratic principle. In such a case, a variation in the form of a "no" has triggered alternative selections of the "yes." Subsequent power-based communications are now based on new selections, following the new leader (e.g. the US and no longer the UK), the new ideology (e.g. human rights and sovereignty and no longer sovereignty alone), the new technology (e.g. that nuclear weapons have become a potential weapon in the arsenal of war) is what is expected in the system. The system tries to ensure its (temporary) restabilization by institutionalizing new hegemonies and systems of rule and authority based on such new principles. The once powerless or at least less powerful become the new power. Such new selections can occur as a result of variations at all stages of conflicts. New selections in relation to power constellations in world politics can emerge after conflict episodes (one might think here of gradual, almost invisible transformations of national identity that brings to the fore new leaders and a different state-behavior), or result from issue conflicts (e.g. a new and binding international arms treaty being agreed upon after lengthy debates). They can, however, also occur as a result of identity and subordination conflicts, e.g. after major wars in which the victorious power succeeds to shape (i.e. selection) and institutionalize (i.e. restabilization) a new post-war order [Ikenberry 2000]. Moreover, conflicts within world politics can also lead to evolutionary changes at an over-arching level in the sense that by observing conflicts the system tries to build up new structures that guide future positive selections.

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whereas the negative side of the code enables reflections about alternatives – e.g. power/powerlessness.

Take for example the emergence and evolution, since the 19th century, of regional organizations, international treaties, international humanitarian law, courts and other institutions of transitional justice and a liberal peace-building consensus [Richmond 2005]. All of these new discursive anchors for positive selections can, from a system theoretical perspective, be thus understood as forms of hegemony, authority and rule in world politics, i.e. positive selections that reinforce contingent, yet concrete new power constellations. One should thus not make the mistake here to expect that these aforementioned actors and institutions necessarily make the world safer and more peaceful, even if they normatively claim to do so. Precisely because politics and conflicts are two distinct social forms, we should regard these institutions of multilateralism and peace-building, on the one hand, and actual conflicts, on the other, as standing in a relationship of non-causal symbiosis with each other. Such positive selections, i.e. variations in the form of a "no" that lead to selections based on new expectations about the "yes," highlight why systems theory regards conflicts as the immune-system of society. By stopping routines, challenging entrenched ways of doing "things" and pointing to alternative power constellations, conflicts are pivotal in preventing a system from stasis. The function of conflicts is, in other words, to protect the system from de-differentiation in which it would merely reproduce established hierarchies of power. In the case of politics this means that conflicts "protect" the binary form of the code of power, ensuring that selections can resort to both sides of the code, either privileging the positive side (power), or the negative side (i.e. powerlessness, which however might be a future form of power, if selected).

However, selections can also occur on a second level, namely the level of negative selections. Thus, a "no" can also trigger a recursive connection between "no"-based variations and "no"-based selections. In that case variations in the form of a random "no" do not lead to new kind of selections of the "yes" and to a possible restabilization of the system. Instead, conflicts gradually overarch the host system's logic, selections of new "yes"-based expectations, let alone an overall restabilization of the system, becomes structurally inhibited. The continuation of conflicts guides the horizons of expectations in the system, as I have outlined above usually in relation to a given set of relations

(e.g. West vs. East during Cold War) or a given topic (e.g. imaginaries of the "Middle East" as a topical anchor in world politics) but hardly as an all-encompassing logic because this would end the symbiosis between a system and conflicts, leading to a system's death instead. I have highlighted in the previous section how such lock-in effects of conflict communications underpin the extensive conflict dynamics in various world regions, e.g. Sub-Saharan Africa, Central America or the Middle East [for further details see Stetter 2008]. We can also find such lock-in effects in relation to forms of macro-securitizations at the global level that legitimize "permanent war" at the global level, e.g. the "war" against terrorism [see Buzan and Wæver 2009]. In such entrenched conflict settings selections are based on recursivity based on the constant communication of a "no," including the expectation that a "no" is uttered. The code of power then encounters a crisis in the sense that contestations are now ubiquitous and cannot be contained and that, as a consequence, it no longer suffices to resort to subtle ways of communicating power. Hegemonies, and systems of rule and authority fail in ensuring positive selections, i.e. compliance. Such crises of the code of power [see Stetter 2008] often go hand in hand with an inflationary symbolization of the monopoly of violence, e.g. in heavily securitized regional settings such as the contemporary Middle East or Europe between 1815 and 1945, as well as on a global scale during the two World Wars. It can take many forms, some of them being that the army and police forces constantly have to display their means of coercion in public, that opponents are arrested and intimidated, that threats are constantly issued vis-à-vis foes, or that fear of the security apparatus becomes an essential mechanism of societal control. Such a deep perturbation of politics by conflict dynamics reinforces the entrenched antagonization of identities, i.e. that the mutual rejection of communications between Self and Other is unavoidable. A social reality beyond such constant rejections can hardly be conceived of. Many transnational conflicts in conflict-prone world regions but also the entrenched postcolonial incompatibilities between the West and the Rest/Islam/South point to such dynamics of a deep perturbation of politics by conflict dynamics, as have in the past entrenched conflict settings such as the Cold War or the two World Wars.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In sum, we observe in world politics a restabilization of various forms of rule and authority (*Herrschaft*), yet simultaneously witness manifold variations and selections in the form of contestations, some of them establishing new forms of authority ("yes"-recursivity"), some of them stabilizing as entrenched conflicts ("no"-recursivity). The system theoretical distinction between politics and conflict is helpful in not only discerning both dynamics but also discussing their co-constitution – aka structural coupling – and their conjoined evolution. Conceiving of world politics as inherently conflictive (or, alternatively, as inherently cooperative) is thus from the standpoint of a social theory such as modern systems theory particularly one--sided. A theory of world political order must reflect instead on the discursive symbiosis between politics and conflicts as two separate, yet tightly coupled social forms. The fact that world politics often appear to be disordered and inherently conflictive might, then, not be a reflection of this system's basic properties – because there is always order in the form of some kind of hegemony – but an artefact produced by the way a primarily functionally differentiated society operates and observes itself, namely as risk society. Moreover, since the media of communication in a functionally differentiated society, such as power, are emptied of concrete meaning, very much operating like an empty signifier [see Stäheli 2000], modern society, not only in the sphere of politics, tremendously facilitates various forms of uttering a "no," thereby multiplying selections of the "no" in the form of prolonged conflicts or (symbolic) institutionalization of political alternatives. That is why it appears to many that the contemporary world political order is characterized by a multitude of different contradictory logics, e.g. a Hobbesian, a Lockean and a Kantian as Wendt [1999] has it, and that it is difficult to decide which one dominates. Depending on how (and from where) we look at the world political system it shows a different face. As useful as postmodern anxiety is in understanding that modern world society observes itself through prisms of multitude and risks and in understanding why conflicts are so central to the modern era, this perspective should be complemented by social theory that elucidates the communicative dynamics underpinning both politics and conflicts. A systems

theoretical perspective on the inter-relationship between (multiple) forms of rule and authority, triggered by selections of a "yes" in power-based communications, on the one hand, and the testing of alternatives and identity-related antagonisms linked to selections of a "no" in conflict-based communications, on the other, does just this – and thereby is a fruitful theoretical perspective to study world politics as a realm characterized by a symbiotic relationship between hegemonies, rule and authority, on the one hand, and conflicts and antagonizations, on the other.

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