

# **The Military of Guatemala and Niklas Luhmann's Theory of Autopoietic Social Systems**

Jochen H.Ch. Kirsch

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the  
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in  
Political Science

Dr. Timothy W. Luke  
Dr. Ellsworth R. Fuhrman  
Dr. Ilja A. Luciak

May 8, 1998  
Blacksburg, Virginia

Keywords: Luhmann, Guatemala, Military

---

**The Military of Guatemala and  
Niklas Luhmann's  
Theory of Autopoietic Social Systems**

**Jochen H.Ch. Kirsch**

(Abstract)

Niklas Luhmann's theory of autopoietic social systems challenges traditional social science by dissolving the individual as an analytical category and replacing it with the functional structures of social systems. The opaque complexity of this model of thought has rendered it extremely difficult to understand and apply, which has obstructed its reception on the part of empirically oriented scholars.

This paper investigates the political and military strategy of Guatemala's armed forces during the 1960s-1990s civil war from the perspective of the theory of autopoietic social systems. It thereby illustrates and illuminates Luhmann's highly abstract theoretical framework and demonstrates its scope and limits as an explanatory model guiding empirical research in the social sciences. By the same token, it lends moderate support to the universality claim Luhmann makes for his radical systems perspective and proposes new avenues of thought that could lead to a better understanding of Third World politics.

## Contents

Methodological Preface: Hermeneutics as a Methodology of Interpreting the Theory of Autopoietic Social Systems .....	iv
I. The Interpretation of Luhmann's Writings: A Challenge to Hermeneutics .....	iv
II. A Look at Hermeneutics.....	v
III. The Concept of Understanding in the Theory of Autopoietic Social Systems: A Conflict with Hermeneutics?.....	x
0. Introduction.....	1
1. Structure and Methods of the Investigation.....	3
1.1 The Interpretation of Luhmann's Writings: An Application of Ricœur's Phenomenological Hermeneutics .....	4
1.2 The Application of Luhmann's Theoretical Framework: A Case Study Approach .....	4
2. Niklas Luhmann's Theory of Autopoietic Social Systems.....	7
2.1 General Systems Theory.....	7
2.1.1 The Concept of Autopoiesis .....	8
2.2 Niklas Luhmann's Theory of Social Systems.....	9
2.2.1 Functional-Structural Systems Theory.....	9
2.2.2 The 'Autopoietic Turn' .....	11
2.2.3 Key Components of the Theory of Autopoietic Social Systems .....	21
3. The Military of Guatemala as an Autopoietic Social System.....	23
3.1 The Military in the Recent History of Guatemala.....	23
3.1.1 The <i>Coup d'État</i> of 1954 and its Aftermath.....	23
3.1.2 Military Supremacy .....	24
3.1.3 Insurgency and Counterinsurgency .....	26
3.1.4 The Peace Process.....	27
3.2 The Military of Guatemala from the Perspective of Niklas Luhmann's Theory of Autopoietic Social Systems.....	29

---

3.2.1	The Functional Structures of Guatemala's Armed Forces.....	30
3.2.2	Functional Structures and Individual Action .....	35
3.2.3	An Autopoiesis of Atrocity.....	37
4.	Conclusions .....	38
4.1	Findings.....	38
4.2	Objections and Limitations.....	39
4.3	Final Evaluation.....	42
	References and Bibliography.....	43
A)	Luhmann .....	43
B)	Guatemala .....	44
C)	Methods.....	44
	Vita.....	46

## **Objects**

Box 1: Analytical Steps of the Investigation.....	3
Box 2: Case Study Design .....	5

## **Methodological Preface: Hermeneutics as a Methodology of Interpreting the Theory of Autopoietic Social Systems**

In this research paper, I will first seek to offer a provisional interpretation of the complex variety of writings that, put together, constitute what I will call Niklas Luhmann's theory of autopoietic social systems. I will then use the theoretical framework resulting from that interpretation as a guiding perspective for a case study of Guatemala's military. As can be seen, it is of crucial importance for my research project to make sure that an appropriate way of interpretation is chosen. Hence, before getting into *medias res*, some general methodological deliberations about the art of interpretation appear useful.

### **I. The Interpretation of Luhmann's Writings: A Challenge to Hermeneutics**

The interpretation of Luhmann's theoretical deliberations is a particularly difficult endeavour. Luhmann deliberately obstacles the access to his texts by the extreme obscurity of his language. Why, the question arises, would a scholar see a benefit in not being understood by the majority of his discipline? Is it - as has been argued by his academic opponents - just a 'spleen' of a social philosopher who has lost touch with the rest of the social sciences? Luhmann defies such criticism by pointing to a rational reason for his 'labyrinthic' style of argumentation. The lack of superficial understanding at first glance, he argues, is the precondition for an in-depth understanding at second glance. In other words: obscurity and intricacy prevent premature 'pseudo-understanding'. Luhmann writes:

Soziologie ist nicht die Lehre vom ersten Blick, sondern die Lehre vom Zweiten Blick. Und auf den Zweiten Blick kommen Fragen und Bedenken hoch. Sollte man alles, was gesagt wird, unter die Knute der Verständlichkeit zwingen?  
(SOZA 3: 170)<sup>1</sup>

Luhmann wishes to liberate his theorizing from the 'stranglehold of understandability'. By virtue of its distance to ordinary language concept definitions, Luhmann's theoretical language is supposed to create a certain controllability of understanding. As Kneer & Nassehi (1993: 14) point out, it is precisely his *Begriffsverfremdung*, his alienation of concepts,

---

<sup>1</sup> All block quotes in languages other than English are paraphrased or explained in the paragraphs immediately preceding or following them.

through which Luhmann hopes to make possible a proper understanding of his theoretical deliberations:

Das Problem ist: Wie erzeuge ich mit sprachlichen Mitteln hinreichende *Simultanpräsenz* komplexer Sachverhalte und damit hinreichende Kontrolle über die Anschlußbewegung des Redens und Verstehens. (SOZA 3: 175)

Luhmann requires his readers to 'go the extra mile' of coming to grips with the obscurity of his writing style. This renders the interpretation of Luhmann's writings particularly difficult. The epistemology and methodology underlying scientific text interpretation is known as hermeneutics. Hence, the difficulty of understanding Luhmann's writings is a hermeneutic difficulty. It has to be overcome with hermeneutic methodology.

## II. A Look at Hermeneutics

Wilhelm Dilthey, one of the founders of the discipline, defines hermeneutics as the *Kunstlehre*, the technique or methodology, of 'exegesis or interpretation' (COHER: 10). Following Bleicher, who defines it more loosely as "the theory or philosophy of the interpretation of meaning" (COHER: 1), the twofold 'problem of hermeneutics' can be described as how a subject can recognize meaning in human expressions and transpose it into his or her own system of meanings and "how to render accounts of subjectively intended meaning objective in the face of the fact that they are mediated by the interpreter's own subjectivity" (COHER: 1).

### *Historical Hermeneutics*

Hermes transmitted the messages of the gods to the mortals and rendered their words intelligible and meaningful, which frequently required clarification and commentary. In this spirit, medieval hermeneutics - typically geared towards disputes about the exegesis of the Bible - engaged in two tasks: ascertaining the exact meaning of words, sentences and texts and discovering symbolically coded divine instructions therein. With Friedrich Schleiermacher's Romantic hermeneutics, the focus of the discipline shifted from providing a technology for 'correct' understanding to understanding as creative reformulation and reconstruction, emphasizing the relationship between individuality and totality. Schleiermacher also pointed out the 'linguisticity' of understanding - e.g., the idea that the meaning of every word has to be determined in reference to its coexistence with the words surrounding it - and the 'psychologicality' of meaning. He complemented grammatical exegesis with psychological interpretation, which he hoped would enable the interpreter to understand the author better than

he understood himself (COHER: 15). Dilthey, who was a student of Schleiermacher's, finds that "the interpreter who follows conscientiously the train of thought of the author will have to bring many elements to consciousness which could remain unconscious in the latter" (Di XIV/I: 707). Schleiermacher's and Dilthey's insights provide a crucial clue to the interpretation of Luhmann. To be sure, the issue is not one of understanding Luhmann literally worse or better than he understood himself. What Schleiermacher and Dilthey encourage us to do, however, is to accept the 'truth' of any meaning hermeneutic methodology unveils, even if there is a suspicion that it is not what the author had in mind - i.e., what he was conscious about - when he wrote the respective passage. A meaning, Schleiermacher and Dilthey make us see, is not more or less 'true' pending the author's conscious intention to convey it.

With Dilthey's *Critique of Historical Reason*, hermeneutics became the epistemology of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, establishing historical and social sciences as sciences in their own right and providing the foundation on which the incursion of the natural science's positivistic epistemology into the territory of the mind and its manifestations could be repelled (COHER: 16). Dilthey's paramount contribution to hermeneutics is the idea of *verstehen* as the methodology of 'reliving' the empirically 'given' experience of historical objectifications as an equivalent to observation. In his attempt to 'elevate' the *Geisteswissenschaften* to the level of exactness and objectivity that usually is attributed to the natural sciences<sup>2</sup>, however, his accounts exhibit a problematic scientific feature. This is why Dilthey fails to do justice to the subject/subject relation of author and interpreter - instead stylizing it "into the familiar subject/object one" (COHER: 24) - and to

the need for self-reflection in which the subject realizes his indebtedness to tradition and language as the bases and media of his thinking: the 'hermeneutic experience', to which Gadamer and Ricœur refer as *Zugehörigkeit* or *appartenance* (belonging-to) respectively. (COHER: 24)

### *Contemporary Hermeneutics*

Following Bleicher, three separable strands can be distinguished in contemporary hermeneutics:

- Hermeneutical theory
- Hermeneutic philosophy
- Critical hermeneutics

---

<sup>2</sup> This epistemological project reached its peak with the works of Betti (COHER: 27-94).



The *verstehen* mode of text interpretation, the above discussed technique of re-experiencing and re-thinking what the author originally felt or thought, is the object domain of hermeneutical theory. As we have seen, this epistemology and methodology of understanding has two principal aims: one, the avoidance of misunderstanding, and two, the creation of 'relatively objective' knowledge where the historicity of a text impedes 'spontaneous' understanding. This endeavour is fundamentally questioned by hermeneutic philosophy. Bleicher writes:

It is precisely the hope to find a basis for the scientific investigation of meaning which *hermeneutic philosophy* rejects as 'objectivism'. A central insight of hermeneutic philosophy asserts that social scientist or interpreter and object are linked by a context of tradition - which implies that he already has a pre-understanding of his object as he approaches it, thereby being unable to start with a neutral mind. The conception of what is involved in understanding consequently shifts from the reproduction of a pre-given object to the participation in on-going communication between past and present. (COHER: 2)

Pointing to the *hermeneutic circle*, hermeneutic philosophy reminds us that text interpretation can never arrive at a *fundamentum inconcussum* of positive knowledge: our 'life world' - i.e., our lived experience - informs a pre-understanding, a projective anticipation of meaning, which renders the revelation of 'pure meaning' impossible. In the process of interpretation, in turn, our understanding of a text becomes part of the 'life world' further enhancing our pre-understanding. The aim of understanding, hermeneutic philosophy argues, "can consequently no longer be the objective re-cognition of the author's intended meaning, but the emergence of practically relevant knowledge in which the subject himself is changed by being made aware of new possibilities of existence and his responsibility for his own future" (COHER: 3). The existentialist notion of 'new possibilities for existence' aside, hermeneutic philosophy holds that a mode of understanding is only meaningful - which means: useful - if it yields information that is 'practically relevant' to the interpreter. Following this argument, any scientific interpretation of Luhmann is useless unless it can be made practical within the scientific perspective it is undertaken from. In a nutshell: while hermeneutical theory teaches us that the interpretation of Luhmann does not tell us what Luhmann 'really had in mind', but what his texts 'tell us', hermeneutic philosophy takes us one step further: the aim of our interpretation - i.e., of finding out what his texts 'tell us' - should be the exploration of how Luhmann's deliberations can be rendered practical for where we are coming from, namely, political science.

Both hermeneutical theory and hermeneutic philosophy focus on the 'linguisticity' of the interpretive process. Along with structural linguists like Ferdinand de Saussure,<sup>3</sup> they assume that meaning is constituted by linguistic context alone and that author and interpreter likewise understand the meanings of the semantic elements - i.e., words, sentences, texts - they deal with. This perspective is contested as too narrow by critical hermeneutics, which rebukes both hermeneutical theory and hermeneutic philosophy for "their neglect to consider extra-linguistic factors which also help to constitute the context of thought and action" (COHER: 3). The factors that Jürgen Habermas<sup>4</sup> and other adherents to critical hermeneutics have in mind are structures of power which express themselves in techniques of domination and instrumental rationality. Critical hermeneutics also points out an unjustifiable claim to universality on the part of hermeneutic philosophy, which regards "tradition embedded in language as forming a supportive consensus that cannot itself be questioned since it provides the conditions of its possibility" (COHER: 3-4). In other words: a consensus of meaning supportive of understanding can never be universal because meanings are never 'given' - i.e., timelessly and spacelessly defined - but evolve with understanding itself.

In spite of the valuable clues about understanding texts they yield, none of the three strands of contemporary hermeneutics seems adequate as an epistemological and methodological guideline for the interpretation of Luhmann. In contrast, Paul Ricœur's reconciliatory approach, bringing the strands together and blending them with structuralism, may very well have that quality.

#### *Ricœur's Phenomenological Hermeneutics*

Ricœur's phenomenological hermeneutics attempts to integrate the distinct strands of contemporary hermeneutics into a larger framework and - through a synthesis of objective and existential modes of interpretation - "provides the basis for the transcendence of the *verstehen*-explanation dichotomy at the level of textual criticism" (COHER: 5). In this fashion, Ricœur develops a strategy of dealing with texts as intricate and obscure as Luhmann's.

Ricœur conceives of a text as a formation of signs "semantically related not to reality but to a 'quasi-world' which itself, however, stands in a semantic relation to reality" (COHER: 5). In his essay *What is a Text?* he argues that the 'subtle balance' of *difference* - i.e., separation of

---

<sup>3</sup> see COHER: 31, 223

<sup>4</sup> see COHER: 3, 4

the world of signs from the world of things - and *reference* - i.e., the 'pouring back' of language into the universe - is preserved in speech and destroyed in writing:

[...]In living speech, the *ideal* meaning of what one says bends towards a *real* reference, namely to that 'about which' one speaks. This is no longer the case when a text takes the place of speech. The shifting of references towards ostensive designation (showing) is intercepted, at the same time that dialogue is interrupted by the text. [...]In this suspension wherein reference is deferred, in the sense that it is postponed, a text is somehow 'in the air', outside the world or without a world; by means of this obliteration of all relation to the world, every text is free to enter into relation with all the other texts which come to take the place of the circumstantial reality shown by living speech. This relation of one text to another, in the disappearance of the world about which one speaks, engenders the quasi-world of text or *literature*. (WHTEXT: 240)

In other words: writing no longer refers to the world - as speech does - but to a quasi-world consistent in the context of the text, i.e., potentially any other text. In a text, face-to-face dialogue is 'intercepted'. We enter a world of "double effacement (occultation) of reader and writer" (WHTEXT: 234), where reference is mediated - or, as Ricœur calls it: deferred - by the textuality of the message. Because of this tension or suspense between the world of the text - i.e., literature - and the world of the reader it is the task of reading to actualize the reference of the text in a dialectical interplay of two attitudes. The first, structural analysis, remains in the suspense of the text and treats it as "worldless and authorless" (WHTEXT: 236). The second, emphatic interpretation, removes the suspense and returns the text "into living communication" (WHTEXT: 236). Since both linguistic<sup>5</sup> and anthropological<sup>6</sup> analysis rely on the same scientific principle of structural self-similarity on different levels (WHTEXT: 237-241), Ricœur holds,

interpretation will no longer be confronted with a model foreign to the human sciences, a model of intelligibility, borrowed from a science, linguistics, belonging to the same field of human sciences. As a result, it will be on the same ground, inside the same sphere of language that explanation and interpretation will dispute each other. (WHTEXT: 241)

In plain English: the dispute between explanation, the methodology affiliated to the sciences, and interpretation, the methodology affiliated to the *Geisteswissenschaften*, is obsolete because, as structural analysis reveals, both can be traced back to certain basic properties of

---

<sup>5</sup> Ricœur refers to the works of Ferdinand de Saussure.

<sup>6</sup> Ricœur refers to the works of Claude Lévy-Strauss.

language. Thus, both methodologies are - at least in principle - equally scientific and equally legitimate.

In a similar way, Ricœur maintains, the dispute between hermeneutic philosophy and critical hermeneutics is unnecessary, because in the interpretation of texts, hermeneutics and reflective philosophy are "correlative and reciprocal" (WHTTEXT: 241).

Thus, it is necessary to say [...] that reflection is nothing without mediation by means of signs and cultural works and that explanation is nothing if it is not incorporated, as an intermediary stage, in the process of self-understanding. In short, in hermeneutical reflection - or in reflective hermeneutics - the constitution of *self* and that of meaning are contemporaneous. (WHTTEXT: 241-242)

There are, Ricœur proceeds to argue, "inner connections that render structural analysis and hermeneutics [understood as reflective hermeneutics as outlined above - J.K.] complementary" (WHTTEXT: 242). Together, objective analysis and subjective interpretation constitute what he calls the hermeneutical arch: in-depth semantics and interpretation - understood as appropriation - could and should work hand in hand, relying on one another, towards the goal of understanding (WHTTEXT: 246).

### **III. The Concept of Understanding in the Theory of Autopoietic Social Systems: A Conflict with Hermeneutics?**

Luhmann conceives of understanding as an operation of a social system rather than of an individual subject. This concept of understanding raises questions regarding hermeneutics. Doesn't it contradict the notion of a reflective individual systematically coming to an understanding, as put forward by contemporary hermeneutics? Doesn't this contradiction between hermeneutics and systems theory render any attempt of approaching Luhmann with hermeneutical means absurd? There are two reasons why Luhmann's conception of understanding does not jeopardize the project of interpreting Luhmann on hermeneutical grounds.

First, his accounts refer exclusively to understanding as a *social* phenomenon. What 'is understood' through and in communication, e.g., within a scientific community, is a product of the social system of communication. This does not preclude 'personal' or 'private' understanding on the part of the individual. As Kneer & Nassehi point out, "in that case, however, we are dealing with internal operations of the consciousness (thoughts or imaginations), performances of the psychic system [i.e., the individual mind - J.K.], which do not enter into communication the way they are conceived" (KNENAS: 82; my translation). Thus, within Luhmann's theory of social systems, an individual can come to a 'personal' understanding,

but this understanding is confined to his or her psychic system. A 'personal' understanding can not be communicated, because as soon as it enters the social system of communication, it is 'transformed' from a subject of individual reflection into a subject of system operations. Now, if - according to Luhmann - an understanding on hermeneutical grounds can be reached but not properly communicated, isn't it still pointless to apply this methodology to his texts? This is where the second of the abovementioned reasons comes in: if what 'is understood' about Luhmann through and in communication is a property of the social system of communication within the scientific community of systems theory, than the entire endeavour of interpretation - in fact this entire paper, including these deliberations - is part of that system. There is not necessarily a conflict between Luhmann's theory of social systems and hermeneutics because the hermeneutic challenge of interpreting Luhmann's texts is an endeavour *a priori* embedded in - and feeding - the social system of communication applicable to the writer and the readers of its results.

As Luhmann points out in various places within his oeuvre, his theory of social systems is supposed to be a versatile theory making phenomena appear in a different light and enhancing our understanding. Although it challenges the epistemological tradition of the social sciences, it is not necessarily intended to be a *novum organon*. With this insight in mind, we see that systems theory à la Luhmann and hermeneutics à la Ricoeur do not inevitably have to be opposing world views. They are equally legitimate epistemological and methodological alternatives that, with regard to certain objects of study, may even complement each other.

## 0. Introduction

On June 18, 1954 colonel Carlos Castillo Armas and about 200 mercenaries of his 'liberation' movement, trained under the supervision and with financial aid of the Department of State and the CIA, invaded Guatemala from Honduras. While Guatemala protested in vain before the United Nations Security Council, the CIA flew air raids, demoralizing the citizens of the country's major cities with constant bombings. On June 27, Jacobo Arbenz, the democratically elected president of Guatemala, succumbed to the pressure inflicted upon his government and resigned. On July 8, Castillo Armas, the CIA's choice<sup>7</sup> as new president of Guatemala, was flown to the capital on the aircraft of the US ambassador and took office (BAGUA: 55-56). The following 42 years - until the ratification of the peace accord between the guerrilla movement *Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional de Guatemala* (URNG) and the government in December 1996 - Guatemala suffered from a pervasive militarization and a devastating civil war, rendering the country notorious for human rights abuses (DEMAR: 11-19). During the Cold War and beyond, the military of Guatemala has been the purveyor of a political and economic oligarchy backed by the State Department and the CIA (DEMAR: 12). In the name of national security it subjugated the society and politics of Guatemala to the logic and mechanics of counterinsurgency (DEMAR: 13).

In the late 1970s - partly as a response to international pressure - peace negotiations were initiated, but due to the military's obstinacy hardly gained any momentum (DEMAR: 178-205). The standoff lasted until the election of Alvaro Arzú in January 1996, who made civil peace his "top priority" (TE 1996: 42). With a revival of the peace talks, at last things seemed to change for the better. In spite of the ongoing armed confrontation between the military and the URNG, a pacification of the country appeared to be in sight.

In this climate of moderate optimism, the Guatemala office of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation<sup>8</sup> organized a series of conferences between representatives of the military and the civil society of Guatemala. In support of the peace process, the FES sought to encourage communication between the conflicting interest groups of the country. As an intern with the foundation, I had the opportunity to be part of this endeavour. As the conferences progressed, I noticed that the policies the military pursued - inside and outside the conference

---

<sup>7</sup> Castillo Armas had received military training in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, USA.

<sup>8</sup> The FES is a German foundation dedicated to social democracy and international development. It has offices in most less developed countries (LDCs).

room - appeared to be in conspicuous accordance with the operations of autopoietic social systems as described by Niklas Luhmann. This observation was somewhat surprising since Luhmann himself designs his theory of autopoietic social systems with European and North American welfare states in mind - neglecting underdeveloped countries - and mentions the economy, politics, law and the educational system - but not the military - as examples of autopoietic social systems. However, Luhmann claims that his theoretical framework is applicable to all social phenomena. My personal observation appears to lend support to this universality claim.

Hence, the guiding hypothesis of this paper is:

*The political and military strategy of the Guatemala's armed forces during the 1960s-1990s civil war can be explained with the conceptual framework of Niklas Luhmann's theory of autopoietic social systems.*

With respect to this hypothesis, the concept 'military of Guatemala' refers to the armed forces of Guatemala with the ideological and hierarchical structure they developed after 1954 and retained through the 'hot' civil war period from 1966 until - at least! - 1997. If the guiding hypothesis is correct, an investigation of the political and military strategy of post-1954 Guatemala's armed forces from the perspective of the theory of autopoietic social systems should help illuminate the opaque complexity of Luhmann's theoretical framework and lend support to the universality claim he makes for it. It should also demonstrate the scope and limits of Luhmann's model of thought as an explanatory model guiding empirical research in the social sciences and offer a new perspective on Third World politics. In what follows, I would like to explore these assumptions systematically, critically assessing the guiding hypothesis.

## 1. Structure and Methods of the Investigation

The research question of this investigation, derived from its guiding hypothesis, is:

*Can the political and military strategy of Guatemala's armed forces during the 1960s-1990s civil war be explained with the conceptual framework of Niklas Luhmann's theory of autopoietic social systems?*

An answer to this question calls for two separate steps of analysis. In a first step, undertaken in chapter 2, the development of Niklas Luhmann's theory of social systems shall be traced and its core elements mapped out. Applying a hermeneutical approach, the objective of this first analytical step will be to provide a concise and stringent account of Luhmann's versatile and intricate thought, pointing out internal logical relations as well as fissures and ruptures and thereby

- discerning more or less consistent stages in the development of his theoretical orientation, laying the groundwork for
- developing an understanding of his essential concepts that can be used as a portfolio for a case study.

The focus of the analysis will be on Luhmann's later work, beginning with the early 1980s, when the concept of autopoiesis emerged in his publications. In a second step, undertaken in chapter 3, Luhmann's theoretical framework shall be used as a portfolio for the analysis of the structure and operations of the Guatemalan military. A case study approach, although very limited in scope, will be applied. The objective of this second analytical step is to find out whether or not empirical findings - the 'hard cold facts' - as described from the perspectives of main stream models of thought by other scholars - can sensibly be rephrased within Luhmann's theoretical framework.

### Step #1: Niklas Luhmann's Theory of Autopoietic Social Systems

Aim: practical interpretation of Luhmann's theoretical framework

Method: hermeneutics (text analysis and meaning appropriation)

### Step #2: The Guatemalan Military as an Autopoietic Social System

Aim: application of Luhmann's theoretical framework to the military of Guatemala

Method: case study (data analysis and theory application)

Box 1: Analytical Steps of the Investigation



In other words: an answer to the research question will be attempted. In so doing, two particular issues will be paid special attention to: the unprecedented brutality of the military's counterinsurgent activities and its remarkable obstinacy in the peace negotiations.

### **1.1 The Interpretation of Luhmann's Writings: An Application of Ricœur's Phenomenological Hermeneutics**

As the thorough discussion in the methodological preface demonstrated, there are reasons to consider Ricœur's phenomenological hermeneutics - an approach of textual criticism that reconciles structural analysis with hermeneutics and thereby overcomes the *verstehen*-explanation dichotomy - the most comprehensive and sensible approach currently at hand to the 'hermeneutical problem' of appropriating meaning from texts. Hence, in the face of the particular challenge Luhmann's intricate style of writing poses to his interpreters, it seems wise to epistemologically and methodologically base the ensuing interpretation of his texts thereon.

### **1.2 The Application of Luhmann's Theoretical Framework: A Case Study Approach**

A typical feature of grand theory in the social sciences is what could be called the 'theoretical mushroom'<sup>9</sup>. Like most grand theory - e.g., the works of Emile Durkheim, Max Weber and Talcott Parsons - the elaboration of Niklas Luhmann's theory of autopoietic social systems suffers from a pattern of elaboration the shape of a mushroom or the letter 'T': it claims applicability for the totality of social phenomena but elaborates only on a fraction thereof. In spite of his universality claim, Luhmann's deliberations focus almost exclusively on European welfare states and leave other historical or present societies for the most part aside. This deficit does not automatically render his universality claim inappropriate. It remains to be shown, however, that Luhmann's conceptual framework can be equally illustrated and illuminated by cases that are part of the 'spaces left and right of the mushroom's stem', i.e., for social phenomena he does not explicitly mention. The military of Guatemala is one of those cases.

---

<sup>9</sup> I borrowed the mushroom metaphor from Volker Aue, Senior Assistant to the Chair of Mobile Communications, *Technische Universität Dresden*, Germany

### *Case Study Design*

Yin distinguishes four basic types of case study designs allocated on a 2x2 matrix: single-case versus multiple-case designs on the one hand and holistic versus embedded designs on the other hand (CADE: 46). Regarding the first distinction, Yin notes: "one rationale for a single case is when it represents the *critical case* in testing a well-formulated theory [...] To confirm, challenge, or extend the theory, there may exist a single case, meeting all the conditions for testing the theory" (CADE: 47). In the light of the above deliberations, the military of Guatemala constitutes a critical case of this type for Luhmann's theory of autopoietic social systems. Regarding the second distinction, Yin points out that the holistic design "is advantageous when no logical sub-units can be identified and when the relevant theory underlying the case study is itself of a holistic nature" (CADE: 49) Luhmann's conceptual framework, epistemologically fading out the human sub-units of social systems and arguing on a holistic level, fulfills both these requirements.

A third characteristic of the intended case study lies outside Yin's matrix: in order to yield adequate data, the case study should trace the policies of Guatemala's military for the time period of direct or indirect military rule and armed confrontation with the guerrilla movement. We are thus looking at a longitudinal or historical study.

In summary, the intended case study calls for the following design features:

- |                       |                                                  |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| • <u>Single case</u>  | The military of Guatemala's functional structure |
| • <u>Holistic</u>     | The military as an autopoietic social system     |
| • <u>Longitudinal</u> | Relevant time period: from 1954 until 1997       |

Box 2: Case Study Design

### *Data Collection*

Regarding data collection for the case study, a variety of sources is available. A number of scholars have assembled data and painted a comprehensive picture of Guatemala's recent history from mainstream theoretical perspectives. To be mentioned are in particular the relatively recent works of Jonas (1994, 1996) and Martínez de León (1994), which focus on the involvement of international - i.e., predominantly US - power elites and the increasing militarization of internal affairs, respectively. Both provide valuable information and reference, in spite of their indisputable political biases. Besides these main sources of information, various other monographs will be considered with equal precautions. Especially for the most recent

history, newspaper articles, predominantly the coverage provided by THE ECONOMIST, will be reviewed. As far as available, first-hand information sources of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation's Guatemala office will be used as additional resources for background information. Finally, the Internet will be taken advantage of as a resource for statistics about Guatemala's society, economy and military.

This broad array of qualitative and quantitative data, assembled and interpreted from various theoretical perspectives, should make sure that a comprehensive and multi-faceted account of the military's role in the political structures and processes of Guatemala's recent history will be established. On this background, the structures and operations of the military itself will then be described from Luhmann's radical systems perspective, which will lead to an interpretation of the empirical findings that substantially deviates from the mainstream of Political Science and - hopefully - casts new light on both the theory of autopoietic social systems and the recent history of Guatemala.

## 2. Niklas Luhmann's Theory of Autopoietic Social Systems

Within the social sciences, systems theory has had a long-standing tradition. After Talcott Parsons, the father of sociological systems theory, Niklas Luhmann is the second sociologist to write a programmatic book entitled SOCIAL SYSTEMS. Both Parsons and Luhmann adopted the concept of the system from General Systems Theory. Let's have a quick glance at the basics of this "interdisciplinary paradigm" (KNENAS: 17).

### 2.1 General Systems Theory

The German zoophysiologicalist Ludwig von Bertalanffy, one of the fathers of General Systems Theory, defines a system as "a quantity of interacting elements  $p_1, p_2 \dots p_n$ , characterized by quantitative measures  $Q_1, Q_2, \dots Q_n$ " (ASYS: 115; my translation) and an unambiguous border between itself and its environment.

General Systems Theory distinguishes between closed and open systems. A closed system is homeostatic: since it does not entertain any interchange with its environment, it does not change once it has reached an inner equilibrium. An open system, in contrast, is engaged in constant interchange with its environment, in response to which it changes its status. It therefore only temporarily - if ever - falls into homeostasis. It is important to note that there is no linear causal relationship between system and environment. Rather, an open system is a 'black box' that itself changes its internal organization as a response to changes in its environment. When these changes in turn have an effect on the environment, a feedback loop is established. While the school of classical Cybernetics, as associated with the name of Norbert Wiener, argues that this is how the system controls its environment, the school of Second-Order Cybernetics, as associated with the name of Ranulph Glanville, rather perceives it as a matter of system and environment mutually controlling each other (KNENAS: 21-24).

A system that responds to its environment by changing its internal organization is called a *self-organizing* system. Such a system has a tendency of being *self-oriented*, i.e., of creating the ecological preconditions for its operations through controlling interactions with its environment. This *autological* aspect of self-organizing systems, leading beyond the linear causality of classical physics, is what Luhmann is predominantly interested in.

### 2.1.1 The Concept of Autopoiesis

The concept of autopoiesis, a synthetic composition of two ancient Greek words, was developed by the Chilean biologists Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela. In a nutshell, autopoiesis means *self-reference* and *self-reproduction*. An autopoietic system is a *living* object that *creates* and *maintains* itself. It 'keeps itself alive' - i.e., *reproduces* its vital parts - by its own devices and *refers* to itself - i.e., to its own operative logic - with whatever it does. Kneer & Nassehi write:

Autopoietische Systeme bestehen aus einem rekursiven Netzwerk interagierender Komponenten derart, daß die Komponenten durch ihre Interaktion wiederum dasselbe Netzwerk produzieren. (KNENAS: 56)

As can be seen, autopoietic systems are self-organizing and self-oriented. However, as opposed to the above discussed open systems, they are *operatively closed*, i.e., there is no direct interchange between system and environment. Rather, the system 'experiences' stimuli from its environment as irritations. At this point, it has to be emphasized that an irritation is a phenomenon internal to a system. An irritation is a 'product' of a system.<sup>10</sup> With this in mind, it becomes evident that a closed self-referential system refers to itself even when it responds to irritations. According to Maturana and Varela, the human brain is such a closed self-referential system: stimuli from the environment only enter as disturbances - as 'twist in its sobriety' - into its closed circuit of bioelectrical activity.<sup>11</sup> The operative closedness of the human brain and the human nervous system have far-reaching consequences for processes of cognition and perception:

Das Nervensystem bildet ein selbstreferentiell geschlossenes System, das keinen unmittelbaren Zugang zur Welt hat. Daraus ergibt sich die epistemologische Konsequenz, daß Kognitions- und Wahrnehmungsprozesse kein Bild der Wirklichkeit an sich liefern, sondern systeminterne Konstruktionen anfertigen. (KNENAS: 56)

---

<sup>10</sup> This may be understood in the same way that pain is a product of the human body. Rather the nose than the fist that punches it produces the pain that follows the punch. The one being punched is the only one who experiences the information of being punched as pain. Neither his malfactor nor any bystanders have access to this sensation and he does not have access to theirs: the human nervous system is a closed self-referential system.

<sup>11</sup> However, since it does not create and maintain itself, the human brain is not an autopoietic system (KNENAS: 53-54).

Hence, psychic systems - or systems of consciousness - can not interact with their environment, i.e., anything outside their borders, including other systems of consciousness. In plain English: you can neither truly share any of my ideas nor can I truly share any of yours. However, it is precisely the operative closedness of autopoietic systems that - in spite of inhibiting *direct* input/output interaction - enables them to relate to their environment. This seemingly paradoxical statement requires clarification. The point Maturana and Varela try to make is that living organisms process stimuli from their environment *by virtue* of their operative closedness. Living organisms are *selbsttätig* - i.e., roughly: independent, self-induced - in their relations with their environments: only by becoming something 'internal' to the system does anything from outside its borders become something 'concerning' the system.<sup>12</sup>

## 2.2 Niklas Luhmann's Theory of Social Systems

Luhmann's works on the theory of social systems can be divided into two distinct phases. In the first phase, stretching from the early 1960s to the early 1980s and laying the foundation for his later work, Luhmann conceives of social systems as operatively *open* systems that perform vital functions for the maintenance of society. In the second phase, initiated with *Social Systems* and representing the latest incisive innovation within the theory of social systems, he conceives of social systems as operatively *closed* systems that perform vital functions for the maintenance of their own autopoiesis.

Since Luhmann builds his theory of autopoietic social systems upon his functional-structural systems theory, the former can not be understood without the latter. Hence, before getting into the theory of autopoietic social systems, I will briefly examine the crucial concepts he developed prior to his 'autopoietic turn'.

### 2.2.1 Functional-Structural Systems Theory

Departing from the structural-functional systems theory of Talcott Parsons, Luhmann designs what he calls a functional-structural systems theory. The latter distinguishes itself from the former in two essential respects. Firstly, functional-structural systems theory no longer assumes that social systems generally dispose of a collectively shared pattern of norms and values. Luhmann argues that it is not the existence, but the absence a homogenous structure

---

<sup>12</sup> In this sense, it is open systems that do not - at least not in any sociologically meaningful way - interact with their environments: they merely perform a 'mechanic' function that is not triggered or controlled by themselves. The textbook example of such a case is the thermostat.

of value orientations that characterizes modern societies with their multiple differentiations. According to his *non-normative concept of the social*, a social system is a coherence of social actions that refer to one another and thereby delineate the system from its environment. Secondly, functional-structural systems theory rejects the assumption that social systems necessarily rely on specific operations that can not be substituted by others. Luhmann replaces *causal functionalism*, which seeks to establish a direct connection between system operations and system maintenance, with *equivalence functionalism*. Instead of asking which specific operations are indispensable for system maintenance, equivalence functionalism asks which functions specific operations have and by which functionally equivalent alternatives they could be replaced. Luhmann overcomes the 'maintenance problem' by analyzing the constitution of and the changes within systems with a functional methodology oriented not along the concepts of cause and effect, but along the concepts of problem and solution (KNENAS: 39).

The function of social systems, Luhmann argues, is *reduction of complexity*.<sup>13</sup> They constitute "islands of less complexity" (SOZA 1: 116; my translation) within a world that can not be grasped by the individual because of its extreme complexity. Kneer & Nassehi explain:

Soziale Systeme vermitteln also zwischen der unbestimmten Komplexität der Welt und der Komplexitätsverarbeitungskapazität des einzelnen Menschen.  
(KNENAS: 40)

Thus, the border between system and environment not only delineates an inside from an outside, but also marks a complexity differential: the environment is always more complex than the system (KNENAS: 41). Since its own complexity - i.e., its *eigen* complexity - is limited, every social system can only perceive a fraction of the world complexity. In other words: the size of a social system's 'window' to the complexity of the world is determined by its own complexity. In this sense, less complex systems have a simpler world than more complex systems. It becomes apparent that Luhmann's concept of world complexity does not designate an ontological condition, but the relation between system and world (KNENAS: 42).

### *Trust as a Means of Reduction of Complexity*

In the context of the formula 'reduction of complexity', the concept of trust plays a crucial role. In complex societies, Luhmann argues, there is an increased need for trust between

---

<sup>13</sup> Luhmann defines complexity as the sum of all possible states of a system, society as the sum of all social systems and the world as the sum of all systems and all environments. Consequently, the world has the highest conceivable complexity (see SOZA 1 & 2).

actors. The complexity of the world manifests itself in the endless possibilities of actions that individuals can take at any time. The time slot in which an actor can see what other actors do - and react to it - is too short for processing this complexity. This predicament reduces the rationality of action: there is never enough time to figure out all possible consequences of the action one is about to take. This is where the phenomenon of trust comes into play. Luhmann writes:

Es ergäben sich mehr Chancen für komplexere Rationalität, wenn ich auf ein bestimmtes künftiges (bzw. gleichzeitiges oder vergangenes, für mich aber erst künftig feststellbares) Handeln anderer *vertrauen* möchte. (VER: 26; my italics)

Trust is a generalization of expectations. A judgment of trust 'overdraws' available information and extrapolates it onto similar cases. It is, in Luhmann's words, a sort of "risky advance concession" (VER: 23; my translation) that, through reduction of complexity, opens up action alternatives that would have remained improbable or unattractive without it. If people were not willing to trust each other in certain respects, Luhmann maintains, cooperation - i.e., society and politics - would be impossible.

#### *Functional-Structural Systems Theory as a Means of Reduction of Complexity*

The formula 'reduction of complexity' also captures what functional-structural systems theory is about. With it, Luhmann seeks to achieve an "enhancement of the human capability of grasping and reducing the world's complexity" (SOZA 2: 67; my translation). He calls this objective sociological enlightenment. As can be seen, functional-structural systems theory is designed to re-enter itself as part of its subject.

#### 2.2.2 The 'Autopoietic Turn'

The publication of SOCIAL SYSTEMS marks Luhmann's 'autopoietic turn'. Maturana and Varela conceived of autopoiesis as a biological concept, applicable to systems of organic life. Luhmann changes it into a *sociological* concept, applicable to social and psychical systems. He writes:

Als autopoietisch wollen wir Systeme bezeichnen, die die Elemente, aus denen sie bestehen, selbst produzieren und reproduzieren. Alles, was solche Systeme als Einheit verwenden, ihre Elemente, ihre Prozesse, ihre Strukturen und sich selbst, wird durch eben solche Einheiten im System erst bestimmt. Oder anders gesagt: es gibt weder Input von Einheit in das System, noch Output von Einheit aus dem System. Das heißt nicht, daß keine Beziehungen zur Umwelt bestehen, aber diese Beziehungen liegen auf anderen Realitätsebenen als die Autopoiesis selbst. (ADB: 403)



It has to be pointed out that this generalization and standardization of the concept of autopoiesis does not mean that Luhmann conceives of society as something like a living organism of large proportions. He aims at a sociological theory rather than at a socio-biological theory. Luhmann acknowledges that living organisms, psychic systems and social systems accomplish distinct types of autopoiesis in distinct fashions (ADB: 403).

As a consequence of the 'autopoietic turn', human beings virtually disappear from Luhmann's conceptual framework. To Luhmann, a human being is not a system. Rather, it is a composition of various systems: organic, neuronal and psychical. The concept of human beings as monological subjects clashes with the theory of autopoietic social systems. Luhmann therefore decomposes them into individual systems. Without human beings, social systems can no longer be conceived of as systems of interrelated human actions. Instead, Luhmann now conceives of them as systems of communication, or more precisely: as self-referential self-reproductive systems that constantly produce communication out of communication.

### *Communication*

Luhmann describes communication as a threefold process of selections consisting of information, utterance and understanding. A communication is a synthesis of these three components: it is established when an information, a means of utterance and a mode of understanding are selected (KNENAS: 81-82). The crux of Luhmann's concept of communication is that these selections are not operations of monological subjects, but *properties of systems of communication*. In the words of Kneer & Nassehi:

Die Selektionen Information, Mitteilung und Verstehen gehen nicht auf ein monologisches Subjekt zurück, vielmehr ist eine Mehrheit von psychischen Systemen daran beteiligt. Bei den drei Komponenten Information, Mitteilung und Verstehen handelt es sich überhaupt nicht um Operationen der beteiligten psychischen Systeme sondern um Bestandteile der Kommunikation, also um Konstrukte sozialer Systeme. (KNENAS: 82)

Contrary to the occidental tradition of the philosophy of the subject, within the framework of the theory of autopoietic social systems, human beings are not the authors of communication. Rather than a result of human action, communication is a product of social systems. Hence Luhmann's provocative statement:

Der Mensch kann nicht kommunizieren; nur die Kommunikation kann kommunizieren. (WISSG: 31)

It follows that "there is no communication outside the communication system of society. This system is the only one employing this type of operation" (SOCSY: 34).<sup>14</sup> Luhmann admits that communication is inconceivable without consciousness (WISSG: 281), but insists that communication and consciousness are two different types of autopoietic systems operating separately from one another. The communication concatenates connecting communications while the systems of consciousness involved with the communication concatenate connecting thoughts, without any parallelity or overlapping of the two networks (KNENAS: 72).

There is no interface between systems of consciousness and systems of communication. Rather, communication is constantly irritated and disturbed by consciousness. These irritations and disturbances from systems of consciousness are indispensable for the autopoiesis of systems of communication. Without them, there would be nothing to communicate. In response to the irritations and disturbances from consciousness, communication produces connecting communications. Nonetheless, the actual thoughts of a consciousness never enter a communication and the actual information of a communication never enters a consciousness. Although systems of consciousness provide indispensable environmental contributions to the autopoiesis of systems of communication, both types of systems stay self-referential and self-reproductive.<sup>15</sup> They are autonomous, but not autark. Luhmann calls this type of relationship between two systems *structural coupling*.

### *Action*

Within the theory of autopoietic social systems, actions - as opposed to communications - are not elements of social systems but products of social descriptions. Luhmann writes:

Handlungen werden durch Zurechnungsprozesse konstituiert. Sie kommen dadurch zustande, daß Selektionen, aus welchen Gründen, in welchen Kontexten und mit Hilfe welcher Semantiken ('Absicht', 'Motiv', 'Interesse') immer, auf Systeme zugerechnet werden. [...] Was eine Einzelhandlung ist, läßt sich deshalb nur auf Grund einer sozialen Beschreibung ermitteln. (SOZSY: 228)

---

<sup>14</sup> Luhmann talks about systems of communication both in the singular and in the plural. With the singular he appears to refer to communication as a general type of system, with the plural to individual occurrences of that type.

<sup>15</sup> As Luhmann points out, a system is either autopoietic or it is not. There are no half autopoietic, half allopoietic systems (SOZA 4: 318).

Luhmann points out that systems of communication usually conceive of themselves as systems of action. A connecting communication treats a previous communication as a communicative action of a person. By this token, systems of communication keep creating starting points for connecting communications. Let's let Luhmann speak for himself once again at this point:

Der elementare, Soziales als besondere Realität konstituierende Prozeß ist ein Kommunikationsprozeß. Dieser Prozeß muß aber, um sich selbst steuern zu können, auf Handlungen reduziert, in Handlungen dekomponiert werden. Soziale Systeme werden demnach nicht aus Handlungen aufgebaut, so als ob diese Handlungen aufgrund der organisch-psychischen Konstitution des Menschen produziert werden und für sich bestehen könnten; sie werden in Handlungen zerlegt und gewinnen durch diese Reduktion Anschlußgrundlagen für weitere Kommunikationsverläufe. (SOZSY: 193)

Within Luhmann's conceptual framework human beings are neither subjects, nor authors, nor causes of communication, let alone of action. Both communication and action originate within communication. The notion that people communicate - in the sense of interaction - is merely an assertion of communication.

### *Understanding*

The operative closedness of both systems of communication and systems of consciousness precludes communication between human beings. As a consequence, there is no understanding between them. What is being communicated as an understanding is a product of communication rather than of consciousness. Although systems of consciousness produce understandings in the form of thoughts, these understandings never enter a system of communication. Rather, what is communicated as an understanding is a product of communication itself. Every connecting conversation signals that the previous conversation has been understood in a certain way. The connecting communication "Ludwig van Beethoven." not only answers the question conveyed by the previous communication "Who composed 'Für Elise'?" but also signals that the previous communication has been understood as one calling for this type - i.e., 'answer to trivia question' - of connecting communication. Within a system of communication, connecting conversations are the only indicators of how previous conversations have been understood. "In this sense," Kneer & Nassehi write, "understanding is a component of communication and not a phenomenon of consciousness" (KNENAS: 85; my translation).

It is important to see the difference between the understanding a psychological system can accomplish and the understanding a social system can accomplish. The former is a thought, produced by a system of consciousness, the latter is a communication, produced by a system of communication. There is no direct link between the two. In the words of classical sociology: an understanding communicated in a group can - if at all - only by pure coincidence be identical with an understanding of any of the group members.<sup>16</sup>

### *Meaning*

What distinguishes both psychological systems and social systems from other systems is the concept of *meaning*. While psychological systems operate meaningful in the form of a closed connection of consciousness, social systems operate meaningful in the form of a closed connection of communication. Knodt writes: "No longer grounded in an external reality - as a representation or mirroring of that reality - meaning resides in the self-referential structure of a consciousness that consists solely in and through its autopoietic operations and that, in selecting from a self-generated horizon of surplus references, reproduces that horizon without ever exhausting its possibilities or transgressing its boundaries" (FOREWORD: XXVI). How exactly does this work?

Luhmann conceives of meaning as the constant process of selection from potentialities referred to by actuality. It takes place in response to the instability of the 'kernel of actuality'. As actuality decays, a selection from within the horizon of surplus references to potentialities is made. The respective potentiality subsequently takes the place of what used to be actual-

---

<sup>16</sup> In spite of this parallelism, classical sociology and the theory of autopoietic social systems are by no means directly compatible. Any equation of social systems with groups and of psychological systems with individuals has to be avoided. Although Luhmann does not *per se* discard the classic and established models of thought of his discipline, his theoretical framework is meant to be a counterproposal - not a mere adjunct - to the mainstream of the social sciences. Izuzquiza (1990: 73-74) aptly calls it a 'theory as scandal'. He writes:

En cierto sentido, el escándalo es un 'escenario' que el mismo Luhmann se construye como marco de su pensamiento. Muchas veces este escándalo es provocado y querido. [...] Por ello, no es extraño que Luhmann realice una despiadada crítica contra algunos de los más sagrados componentes de la tradición clásica occidental. Una tradición a la que nuestro autor no duda en otorgar el calificativo de 'viejo pensamiento europeo' o 'vieja filosofía europea' (*alteuropäische Philosophie*). Toda la obra de Luhmann puede considerarse como una crítica contra esa 'vieja filosofía europea', que debe ser tenida en cuenta para comprender muchos de los elementos de su obra.

ity. The new actuality brings with it a new horizon of surplus references to potentialities. As the process of actuality decay and potentiality selection repeats itself, any potentialities that are not selected remain possibilities and can be selected at a later time. Luhmann writes:

[...] Sinn haben heißt eben: daß eine der anschließbaren Möglichkeiten als Nachfolgeaktualität gewählt werden *kann* und gewählt werden *muß*, sobald das jeweils Aktuelle verblaßt, ausdünn, seine Aktualität aus eigener Instabilität aufgibt. Die Differenz von Aktualität und Möglichkeit erlaubt mithin eine zeitlich versetzte Handhabung und damit ein Prozessieren der jeweiligen Aktualität entlang von Möglichkeitsanzeigen. Sinn ist somit die Einheit von Aktualisierung und Virtualisierung, Re-Aktualisierung und Re-Virtualisierung als ein sich selbst propellierender (durch Systeme konditionierbarer) Prozeß. (SOZSY: 100)

Meaning provides current experience or action with redundant possibilities. It thereby reduces and maintains complexity at the same time: it reduces complexity by enabling selective access to possibilities and maintains complexity by making it available to further operations of the system. Since it never transcends its self-generated horizon, meaning is an operatively closed, self-referential phenomenon: meaning always refers to further meaning and never to anything outside the realm of meaning. Thus, as Kneer & Nassehi point out, within psychical and social systems, loss of meaning - i.e., meaningless operation - is impossible:

Für sinnverarbeitende Systeme gibt es [...] keinen Sinnverlust. Jede aktualisierte Intention verweist auf weitere Möglichkeiten. Damit ist nicht ausgeschlossen, daß ich denke, etwas sei sinnlos oder daß die Kommunikation kommuniziert, ein Sinnverlust sei eingetreten. In solchen Fällen wird aber ein ganz anderer, und zwar ein emphatischer Sinnbegriff verwendet: Sinn meint dann soetwas wie sinnvoll - und das Gegenteil ist dann sinnlos. Für die Theorie sozialer Systeme ist Sinn hingegen eine unnegierbare Kategorie: Psychische und soziale Systeme sind an das Phänomen Sinn gebunden, sie können also nicht sinnlos operieren. (KNENAS: 78)

### *Societal Semantics*

Since meaning within social and psychical systems is a rather ephemeral phenomenon, societies provide themselves with a generalized form of meaning Luhmann calls *societal semantics*:

Die Gesamtheit der [...] benutzbaren Formen einer Gesellschaft (im Unterschied zur Gesamtheit der Sinn aktualisierenden *Ereignisse* des Erlebens und Handelns) wollen wir die Semantik einer Gesellschaft nennen, ihren semantischen Apparat, ihren Vorrat an bereitgehaltenen Sinnverarbeitungsregeln. Unter Se-

mantik verstehen wir demnach einen höherstufig generalisierten, relativ situationsunabhängig verfügbaren Sinn. (GS 1: 19)

### *Observation*

As we have seen, the theory of autopoietic social systems holds that social systems are systems of communication. A system can only communicate what it can observe. Consequently, observation is a - perhaps *the* - crucial concept within Luhmann's conceptual framework.

Luhmann defines observation according to Spencer Brown's (1971: 3) call "draw a distinction" as *designation by distinction*.<sup>17</sup> Social and psychical systems observe the world - i.e., themselves plus their environment - by means of a fundamental distinction expressed in a binary code. The legal system's binary code is legal/illegal, the political system's is power/non-power and the economic system's is payment/non-payment. In accordance with Luhmann's conceptual framework we can assume that, in the same fashion, the military observes the world as national security/lack thereof. A social system is not capable of communication other than along the lines of its fundamental distinction. Thus, any communication outside the binary code of national security/lack thereof - even if it is members of the military that are communicating and even if it is a military facility where the communication takes place - is a communication outside the military *as a social system*.<sup>18</sup>

Following the principles of cybernetics, autopoietic social systems relate to the world by subjecting it to their system-specific fundamental distinction. In other words: it is exclusively by means of their system-specific binary code that social systems make sense of the world. In a fashion similar to a thermostat, which relates to the world exclusively in terms of (the binary code of) low temperature/high temperature, a social system has a strictly 'one-dimensional' way of relating to its environment; namely, via its binary code. In short: the binary code is a social system's exclusive source of meaning. Anything outside the reach of the binary code is - literally! - meaningless and irrelevant to it. Hence, from Luhmann's perspective, the military makes sense of entities in the world by observing them as incidents of either national security or lack thereof, *tertium non datur*.

---

<sup>17</sup> For a critical discussion of the logic underlying Luhmann's concept of observation see: **Schulte, Günther 1990: Der blinde Fleck in Luhmann's Systemtheorie**. Köln.

<sup>18</sup> As can be seen, the military as a social system must not be mistaken for the totality of all garrisons or all soldiers. Rather, it is the totality of all communications shaped by the binary code of national security/lack thereof.

As can be seen, within Luhmann's theoretical framework, both the communication and the observation of a social system are confined to its binary code.

*The 'Blind Spot'*

The system-specific fundamental distinction expressed in the system-specific binary code is the 'blind spot' of a social system: it can't see, that it can't see, what it can't see. Luhmann writes:

Unbestritten scheint auch zu sein, daß jede Beobachtung beschränkt ist durch die Autopoiesis des eigenen Systems und folglich ihre eigene Instrumentierung mit einem 'blinden Fleck' bezahlen muß; daß sie also nicht sehen kann, daß sie nicht sehen kann, was sie nicht sehen kann. (AUSOBE: 317)

If a system's observation turned to its own fundamental distinction, the paradox - i.e., the undecidable question - inherent to it would become apparent, which would impede the autopoiesis of the system. This means that the military is unable to observe its own binary code of national security/lack thereof *as* national security or lack thereof.

Within the observational confinement of a binary code, the question of whether that binary code is on the positive or the negative side of *itself* can not be answered. The military is therefore incapable of answering the question whether it is conducive or detrimental to national security to divide the world into these categories. Since self-reference invariably engenders a paradox of this type, an autopoietic system needs to 'de-paradoxicate' itself. More precisely, 'de-paradoxication' is necessary to maintain the system's capacity to move on from one observation to another and from one communication to another. Luhmann calls this capacity *connectivity*. The fundamental paradox has to be resolved or made invisible to ensure connectivity within the system. Luhmann argues that, by this token, indeterminable complexity - i.e., indefinite oscillation between two values of observation - is turned into determinable complexity, which enables connectivity (KNENAS: 107).

This vital function is accomplished by virtue of the 'blind spot': the system simply fails to observe the fundamental distinction underlying its observation.<sup>19</sup> As Luhmann puts it, the blind spot is the price a social system pays for its autopoiesis (AUSOBE: 317). As a consequence of this, social systems invariably remain oblivious of the contingency and limitedness of their observation.

---

<sup>19</sup> This does not mean, though, that the system does not observe itself. As Luhmann points out in various parts of his writings, self-observation is a vital part of a social system's operations.

### *First-Order and Second-Order Observation*

Luhmann distinguishes between first-order and second-order observation. Only a second-order observation - i.e., an observation of an observation - can envision the 'blind spot' of a first-order observation and thereby step out of *monocontextuality* and into *polycontextuality*. Luhmann writes:

Ein Beobachter kann nicht sehen, was er nicht sehen kann. Er kann auch nicht sehen, daß er nicht sehen kann, was er nicht sehen kann. Aber es gibt eine Korrekturmöglichkeit: die Beobachtung des Beobachters. Zwar ist auch der Beobachter zweiter Ordnung an einen blinden Fleck gebunden, sonst könnte er nicht beobachten. Der blinde Fleck ist sozusagen sein Apriori. Wenn er aber einen anderen Beobachter beobachtet, kann er dessen blinden Fleck, dessen Apriori, dessen 'latente Strukturen' beobachten. Und indem er das tut und damit seinerseits operierend die Welt durchpflügt, ist auch er der Beobachtung des Beobachtens ausgesetzt. (RUS: 10-11)

There is no privileged perspective, which is why - as Luhmann points out - the ideology critic does not have any advantage over the ideologist. The second-order observer can draw conclusions about his own observation from observing another observer's observation, though.

[Der Beobachter zweiter Ordnung kann daher wissen] daß jede Beobachtungsposition eine eigentümliche Kombination von Blindheit und Sicht ist, also auch die seine, und daß es die Blindheit für Bestimmtes ist, die Sichten auf Bestimmtes eröffnet, und daß diese Sichten ohne Blindheiten nicht zustandekämen. (RUS: 178)

The theory of autopoietic social systems, Luhmann claims, is a second-order observation of society: it observes observers and describes descriptions. By this token, it is deemed to be capable of bringing to light latent structures and functions of social systems (KNENAS: 188).

### *System Differentiation*

The concept of system differentiation is the key concept of Luhmann's - still unachieved - theory of society *within* his general theory of autopoietic systems.

Luhmann distinguishes between three types of social systems: *interactions* are social systems that depend on the *Kopräsenz* - i.e., the simultaneous presence - of persons, *organizations* are social systems that reproduce themselves through conditions of membership and decision techniques and *society* is the most comprehensive social system (KNENAS: 42-43, 111), which he calls the "entirety of all expectable communications" (SoSy: 535). To Luhmann, society is a "system of a higher order, a system of a different type" (SOZA 2: 11). It com-



prises not only all interactions and organizations, but also a multitude of actions that do not originate from systems of interaction or organization. In complex societies, social systems tend to divide themselves into sub-systems.<sup>20</sup> As a result of this system differentiation, within a system there are sub-systems that are part of the environment of other sub-systems of the same system. In other words: there are internal system/environment differences which enhance the operative capacity of the system. Luhmann writes:

Systemdifferenzierung ist nichts anderes als die Wiederholung der Differenz von System und Umwelt innerhalb von Systemen. Das Gesamtsystem benutzt dabei sich selbst als Umwelt für eigene Teilsystembildungen und erreicht auf der Ebene der Teilsysteme dadurch höhere Unwahrscheinlichkeiten durch verstärkte Filterwirkungen gegenüber einer letztlich unkontrollierbaren Umwelt. Danach besteht ein differenziertes System nicht mehr aus einer gewissen Zahl von Teilen und Beziehungen zwischen Teilen; es besteht vielmehr aus einer mehr oder weniger großen Zahl von operativ verwendbaren System/Umwelt-Differenzen, die jeweils an verschiedenen Schnittlinien das Gesamtsystem als Einheit von Teilsystem und Umwelt rekonstruieren. (VORWORT: 22)

The differentiation of the society system - i.e., the 'multiplication' of social systems - creates a threefold spectrum of possible system/environment relations for each social system: first, the relation to the society system, second, the relation to other social systems and third, the relation to itself (WISSG: 635).

### *Programs*

The systemic logics and specifics steering the operations of a society's sub-systems - economy, law, education, politics and so forth - are elaborated in terms of programs. The binary

---

<sup>20</sup> Luhmann emphasizes that a society increases its complexity through the *quality* - not the quantity - of its system differentiations:

Der Zusammenhang von Komplexität und Systemdifferenzierung soll [...] nicht als ein kontinuierlicher unilinearer Steigerungszusammenhang aufgefaßt werden. Unsere inhaltliche Hypothese ist vielmehr, daß die Komplexität, die ein Gesellschaftssystem erreichen kann, abhängt von der *Form* seiner Differenzierung. Je nach dem, unter welchem Leitgesichtspunkt die primäre Differenzierung des Gesellschaftssystems, die Bildung einer ersten Schicht von Teilsystemen eingerichtet ist, gibt es innerhalb des Gesellschaftssystems mehr oder weniger Anlaß zu verschiedenartigem Handeln. Je nachdem erscheinen Handlungszusammenhänge für die handelnden mehr oder weniger selektiv, mehr oder weniger kontingent (GS 1: 22)

code of a social system being the mere 'backbone' of its operational orientation, more specific procedures of how the system deals with its environment are needed. This can best be demonstrated for the legal system, which fleshes out what is legal and what is illegal in catalogs of laws. These laws, Luhmann argues, can be regarded as the program of the legal system.

### 2.2.3 Key Components of the Theory of Autopoietic Social Systems

At this point, I would like to conclude my interpretation and description of Luhmann's theoretical framework. It remains - not surprisingly - far from comprehensive. Because of the enormous size of Luhmann's oeuvre, a selection had to be made. Inevitably, many important concepts were left out or were only mentioned in passing. The above account of the theory of autopoietic social systems should, however, suffice to support the argument that will be mapped out below. In summary, it yielded the following points:

- A system is a quantity of interacting elements that delineates itself from its environment. No system can operate beyond its boundaries. Autopoietic systems are operatively closed, self-referential and self-reproductive systems.
- The function of a social system is to mediate between the overwhelming complexity of the world and the feeble complexity processing capacity of the individual through reduction of indeterminable complexity into determinable complexity. Trust is an important means of reduction of complexity.
- Autopoietic social systems are systems of communication. Although both types of systems are structurally coupled, there is no interface between communication and consciousness. Actions are products of social descriptions. Systems of communication usually perceive themselves as systems of action.
- What is communicated as an understanding is a property of communication rather than of consciousness. The only indicators of how previous conversations have been understood are connecting conversations.
- What distinguishes psychological and social systems from other systems is that they operate meaningful. Meaning is the constant reiteration of selections from within a horizon of potentialities referred to by actuality. It is operatively closed and self-referential. Semantics is meaning that is generalized on a higher level in a society system.
- An autopoietic social system observes the world through designation by distinction. Its observation is confined to a fundamental distinction expressed in a binary code. The bi-

nary code of the military can be assumed to be national security/lack thereof. An autopoietic social system's fundamental distinction is its blind spot: it can't see that it can't see what it can't see. A second-order observation - an observation of an observation - can see the blind spot of the observation it observes. The theory of autopoietic social systems is a second-order observation of society.

- Through system differentiation, social systems divide themselves into sub-systems, repeating the difference between system and environment within the system. The operations of a society's sub-systems are controlled through programs.

### 3. The Military of Guatemala as an Autopoietic Social System

The observations I made on my 1996 internship with the Guatemala office of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation convinced me that the military of Guatemala can be considered an example of an autopoietic social system. Although Luhmann does not mention developing countries and their militaries in his theory of autopoietic social systems, in the recent history of Guatemala the country's armed forces exhibited various features that make it seem appropriate to perceive of them as an autopoietic social system.

#### 3.1 The Military in the Recent History of Guatemala

The military has been the dominant political force in the recent history of Guatemala. Driven by a "Manichean 'national security' logic" (DALIA: 147), the State Department and the CIA lent various types of support, including military aid and combat training, to the more or less thinly disguised military regimes that ruled the country. Although the military of Guatemala soon found itself internationally and domestically in a defensive position, the USA kept considering it an indispensable ally in the prevention of a 'second Cuba' on Central American soil. Therefore, the atrocities with which it asserted its supremacy in the political system of Guatemala during the Cold War were either openly tolerated or at least not decisively denounced.

##### 3.1.1 The *Coup d'État* of 1954 and its Aftermath

In the 1950s, with the Cold War turning increasingly fierce, the USA perceived anything that even remotely resembled communism as a national threat. The State Department and the CIA would therefore not allow any kind of socialism to develop in Latin America. It has been argued that "Eisenhower personally led the charge to put anti-communism before economic aid programs for Latin America" (Ramsey 1997: 15).

The official justification for the evident involvement of the CIA in the *coup d'état* of 1954 - an intervention "proudly acknowledged" (DALIA: 155) by Eisenhower - was the need to destroy the 'communist threat' Guatemala allegedly represented. A propaganda campaign of the CIA had been defaming the Arbenz administration as a 'Soviet beachhead' ever since it had taken office (DALIA: 146). It has to be noted, though, that Arbenz - rather than pushing a truly Marxist agenda - had become a threat to the monopolies of the United Fruit Company (UFCo) and other US companies operating in Guatemala. He went ahead with socialistic and nationalistic reforms initiated by his predecessor Juan José Arévalo under the name

of '*socialismo espiritual*' (BAGUA: 45-54). These reforms, aiming at converting Guatemala from a backward produce supplier for the United States to a modern capitalist economy (BAGUA: 52), involved farmland redistribution,<sup>21</sup> key industry nationalization,<sup>22</sup> and workers rights enforcement.<sup>23</sup> Hence, it has been argued, the 'communism of Guatemala' was a mere polemic in the history of the Cold War (BAGUA: 57), designed to conceal the underlying economical motives of the intervention.

Nonetheless, along with the re-assertion of US control over the national economy, a fertile anti-Communist seed was planted into the political and military sectors of Guatemala.

In the aftermath of the *coup d'état* of 1954, the military of Guatemala was ideologically and hierarchically restructured. Under the supervision of the State Department and the CIA, Guatemala's armed forces were molded into what the 'liberation' troops of Castillo Armas had already been: a staunchly anti-Communist and pro-US protective force for the interests of North American MNCs and domestic elites. This transformation involved training officers in US military facilities and anchoring anti-communism in the ideological base of the armed forces, activities that were intensified in the 1960s (DALIA: 146-147).

### 3.1.2 Military Supremacy

In the 1960s, society and politics of Guatemala were increasingly permeated by military rule. Martínez de León writes:

[E]l poder se militarizó. El ejército asumió un papel preponderante en la estructura política del país; se convirtió en su eje y en el verdadero depositario del poder. (DEMAR: 12)

#### *The Coup d'Etat of 1963*

In 1963, at the height of the Cold War, another *coup d'état* was launched to prevent the foreseeable re-election of ex-president Arévalo who was expected to return to his political program of '*socialismo espiritual*'. As Martínez de León notes, "the coup represented a joint

---

<sup>21</sup> 400,000 of the United Fruit Company's 550,000 acres of farmland - only 15% of which were under cultivation - were expropriated (BAGUA: 53-54).

<sup>22</sup> Arbenz sought to crush the US monopolies on electricity and shipping by building competing power plants, roads and harbors (BAGUA: 52).

<sup>23</sup> Arévalo and Arbenz both encouraged the formation of workers unions - with the notable exception of communist unions (BAGUA: 50) - and forced foreign companies to comply with worker protection regulations.

strategy of the military, private enterprise and the US government, the three factors of power in Guatemala" (DEMAR: 12; my translation) to prevent Guatemala from returning to true national sovereignty. What followed were various more or less undisguised military dictatorships.<sup>24</sup>

*The Military Regimes and Civilian Governments of the 1980s and 1990s*

The political climate in Central America became particularly precarious after the triumph of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and the outbreak of civil war in El Salvador in 1979. As a reaction to the perceived communist threat on the isthmus, the military of Guatemala started "a scorched earth war of unprecedented proportions" (DALIA: 147). The dominance and violence of the military reached their peaks in the early 1980s. With the putsch of 1982 the weak dictator General Lucas García, blamed for the military's lack of success in crushing the insurgency, was replaced by General Efraín Ríos Montt's military junta. Under the ensuing *Plan Nacional de Seguridad y Desarrollo* - i.e., National Security and Development Plan - both the militarization of the state and the atrocities of the military reached unprecedented levels (DEMAR: 16-19, DALIA: 161-165). Entire villages were wiped out by death squadrons in the name of law and order.<sup>25</sup> Jonas reports:

[Between 1981 and 1983] 440 villages were wiped out, between 100,000 and 150,000 civilians were killed or 'disappeared', and more than 1 million persons were displaced. (DALIA: 147)

In a second phase, the military sought to consolidate its power and control through permeating conflict areas with coercive military institutions, such as *Aldeas de Modelo* and *Patrullas de Autodefensa Civil*. Both the forced resettlement camps and the mandatory 'civilian self-defense patrols' - members of which were forced to spy on their neighbours - were under direct military control (DALIA: 147). At the same time, leaking news of human rights abuses brought the military of Guatemala under increasing international pressure. By 1984, the high command decided to veil what factually was a military regime by means of a legally elected president. In 1985, the conservative Christian democrat Vinicio Cerezo was elected president of Guatemala. He was succeeded by Jorge Serrano, a politician of similar ideological orientation, in 1990 (DEMAR: 20-23). Both Cerezo's and Serrano's administrations -

---

<sup>24</sup> For details on that period see BAGUA: 65-174.

<sup>25</sup> As an example, Jonas mentions the massacre of San Francisco, Nentón, Huehuetenango on July 17, 1982. It is estimated that 352 civilians were killed in it, including women and children (BAGUA: 161).

mere democratic 'fig leaves' of military rule<sup>26</sup> - granted the military autonomy with regard to counterinsurgency. As a result, the atrocities continued. Martínez de León describes the political landscape of Guatemala in the 1990s as follows:

El ejército controla todas las actividades sociales, políticas y religiosas. Las fuerzas armadas constituyen, de esa manera, un centro de poder independiente, no subordinado al gobierno. Son el árbitro de la vida política. (DEMAR: 19)

### 3.1.3 Insurgency and Counterinsurgency

In 1960, "a group of progressive military officers joined forces with disaffected civilians to form a guerrilla movement, one of the earliest in Latin America" (DALIA: 146). Various other groups appeared in the following years. The four largest groups later organized themselves as the URNG. From 1963 until 1966, the military regime could not stop the growth of the insurgency. In 1966, under the formally civilian government of Julio César Méndez Montenegro, the first major counterinsurgency campaign of Guatemala was launched with active support from the United States (DALIA: 146-147). Ever since, the single most important - if not exclusive - objective of the armed forces has been counterinsurgency. In the name of national security, it subjugated the society and politics of Guatemala to the logic and mechanics of counterinsurgency. It suppressed workers unions and liberal journalism, declared curfews and fought a merciless civil war against the URNG and its supporters.

As the first armed force to use death squads and 'disappearances' in Latin America, the military of Guatemala became notorious for crimes against humanity (DALIA: 147). As Martínez de León suggests, the reason why the military of Guatemala was capable of such outstanding atrocities - even in comparison to most other military institutions in Latin America - may have to do with political and ethnic factors in its history. The military of Guatemala was founded after the country's independence. Not having fought in any war of independence, it has never acquired a national spirit. It was originally designed for the protection of 19th century *latifundistas* and the political and economic structures of the *encomienda* system (DEMAR: 29-31). Therefore, the Guatemalan military's notion of national security has been inseparably linked to the preservation of the nation's political, economic and social oligarchy,

---

<sup>26</sup> Martínez de León reports that from the late 1980s on executive officers of the military have confirmed that indeed the entire so-called *apertura democrática* - i.e., the apparent political opening - "was part of a far-reaching military strategy" (DEMAR: 20; my translation).

but is absolutely unrelated to the protection - or even respectful treatment - of anybody outside the national elites.<sup>27</sup>

#### 3.1.4 The Peace Process

In January 1987, a first encounter of delegations from the URNG and the government and military<sup>28</sup> of Guatemala took place in Madrid, Spain. What at first promised to be the beginning of a dialogue was abruptly interrupted by decision of the military, though. In March 1990, delegates of the URNG and the *Comisión Nacional de Reconciliación* - i.e., the National Commission for Reconciliation - came together in Oslo, Norway. Both delegations expressed their will to seek a political solution to the 'national problem' of Guatemala. In the following months, the high command of the URNG - in accordance with the Oslo accords - met with representatives of the political, entrepreneurial, religious, academic and professional sectors. For the first time there was exchange and discussion of political positions between the URNG and the civil society of Guatemala. The necessity of institutional and constitutional changes and of a reform towards a participatory democracy was widely acknowledged. All sectors of the civil society also agreed that the human rights abuses had to stop (DEMAR: 87-88). In spite of the military's obstinacy, in April 1991 the second direct encounter of the military and the government with the URNG took place in Mexico City, Mexico. A so-called *acuerdo de procedimiento para la búsqueda de la paz por medios políticos* - i.e., an accord on the proceedings of seeking peace with political means - was achieved. Among others, the accord contained the issue item "[f]ortalecimiento del poder civil y función del ejército en una sociedad democrática" (DEMAR: 88). This call for a strengthening of the civil society and a revision of the military's role in a democratic society threatened the privileged position the military high command enjoyed in the political hierarchy of Guatemala and questioned the image the military had of its own mandate and function. Nonetheless, in July 1991 the 'Querétaro Accord' was signed. As to the contents of the accord, Martínez de León notes:

---

<sup>27</sup> It has to be noted, though, that there are limits to the plausibility of this exposition. Argentina and Chile, whose armed forces - unlike Guatemala's - did fight wars of independence, have been just as notorious for 'disappearances' and the like as Guatemala. Martínez de León tends to overestimate the uniqueness of Guatemala's armed forces with respect to both their history and their brutality.

<sup>28</sup> According to Martínez de León, both institutions formed a "*gobierno-ejército*" (DEMAR: 87; my italics).



El Acuerdo [sic!] establecía la preeminencia de la sociedad civil, así como la necesidad de que las fuerzas armadas estén sometidas al poder civil y de establecer un Estado de Derecho. (DEMAR: 88-89)

In spite of this unmistakable threat to military supremacy, the representatives of the military signed the Accord. This meant by no means, though, that the military was ready to give up on its cause. Notwithstanding its lip service to the Querétaro Accord and its rhetoric about a dialogue, the military intended nothing but a quick and easy defeat of the URNG. Martínez de León writes:

Para el gobierno y el ejército, el único resultado aceptable en la negociación parecía ser la capitulación de la URNG, con la siguiente entrega de las armas y la integración a la vida civil y política *dentro del sistema actual*. (DEMAR: 91; my italics)

Admittedly, the military used 'dialogue' as a euphemism for surrender.<sup>29</sup> Far from being ready to subordinate itself to the civil society in a future participatory democracy, it sought to defend its supremacy in the existing system. Instead of opening itself to changes, it kept on guarding the existing political, economic and social order.

With the election of the human rights activist Ramiro de León Carpio as president of Guatemala in June 1993 the negotiations with the URNG, stalled precisely because of irreconcilable differences regarding human rights issues, were expected to gain new momentum. The high command of the URNG proposed a resumption of the dialogue as soon as possible, on the grounds of the previous accords and with participation of the civil society. Letting down the high expectations invested in him, de León Carpio turned down the URNG's proposal and instead proposed his own plan for the pacification of the country, in which - in clear violation of previous agreements - there was no room for the URNG. Not surprisingly, the *Plan Nacional de la Paz* developed by the government and military, was repelled by the URNG. Since the military still insisted on the more or less unconditional demobilization of the insurgent forces as part of the peace process - which, for obvious reasons, was unacceptable for the URNG - the peace negotiations were stalled again.<sup>30</sup> Until the election of president Arzú, a "tough-minded businessman" (The Wall Street Journal 1997: A18) who brought the peace process back on track with the goal of restoring confidence in domestic economic opportunities, hardly any further progress was made. In fact, even when the peace

---

<sup>29</sup> According to CRONICA of May 19, 1988, these were the exact words of the defense minister at the time.

<sup>30</sup> There were various other controversies between the government, the military, the civil society and the URNG, such as the issues of the national truth commission and the counselor Monseñor Quezada Toruño.

negotiations finally brought tangible results, a host of problems - such as the impunity issue and the persistence of organized crime within the military - remained (TE 1994, 1996, 1997, 1997a, 1997b).

As can be seen, the dialogue with the URNG remained fruitless until the late 1990s mostly because the military constantly protracted and sabotaged it. This obstinacy of the military, as understandable and plausible as it may appear from the perspective of Realism, raises a question from a purely strategic point of view:

Wouldn't a peace accord accomplished under the military's auspices and leadership have helped its case of asserting itself as the only guarantor of national security?

#### *Explanations of the Military's Obstinacy in the Peace Process*

Martínez de León argues that the supreme command of the military opposed the peace process because it was afraid of losing its supremacy in the political structure of the country (DEMAR: 39). His argument is plausible: if the insurgency had been allowed to participate in a peaceful reformatory process, there would no longer have been a need for counterinsurgency (a military defeat of the insurgency, in contrast, would have left the front lines intact). In that case, the military would have been expendable as a guarantor of national security. Thus, it was defeat - not reconciliation - the military was aiming for.

In similar fashion to Martínez de León, various scholars have sought to explain the role of the military in the politics of Guatemala in the civil war era using popular models of thought within Political Science. From a dependency theory point of view - to mention just one example - Suzanne Jonas has argued that the State Department and the CIA, in coalition with North American MNCs, have installed and supported changing puppet regimes in Guatemala and pulled the strings behind the counterinsurgent operations of the military to preserve the interests of North American business and politics. In this context, Jonas talks about a "complex web of relations between various agencies of the US government and the Guatemalan military over the last 40 years" (DALIA: 144).

### **3.2 The Military of Guatemala from the Perspective of Niklas Luhmann's Theory of Autopoietic Social Systems**

The perspectives of Martínez de León and Jonas are doubtlessly fruitful. There might, however, be a perspective 'off the beaten path' worth looking into: the military of Guatemala as an autopoietic social system.

### 3.2.1 The Functional Structures of Guatemala's Armed Forces

From the perspective of Luhmann's theoretical framework, the military of Guatemala's policies during the civil war are no longer the result of individual or corporate intentions and actions, but a series of selections within a social system, controlled and governed by a fundamental distinction and a binary code. In the light of the above deliberations, it can be argued that the opposition of the 'equations'

- national security = preservation of existing structures = counterinsurgency, and
- insurgency = threat to existing structures = lack of national security.

has been the specific *fundamental distinction* of Guatemala's armed forces from the early 1960s until the late 1990s. This is to say that national security and counterinsurgency on the one hand and lack of national security and insurgency on the other hand were inseparably linked in the military of Guatemala's fundamental distinction.

In the preceding chapter, it was suggested that the binary code of national armed forces is generally national security/lack thereof. If - as the above argument suggests - the notion of national security applicable to Guatemala's armed forces was narrowed down to a close-to-exclusive focus on the internal struggle between insurgency and counterinsurgency, it can be inferred that its *binary code* must have been a matching modified variation of the typical one. This system-specific narrowed-down variation of the binary code national security/lack thereof should be captured in the opposition of

- the assertion of the existing system through counterinsurgency, and
- the sabotaging of the existing system through insurgency.

In a nutshell: the military of Guatemala's binary code in the civil war era was the usual, rather broad opposition of national security/lack thereof *broken down to* the specific, rather narrow opposition of counterinsurgency/insurgency. The concepts in front of and after the slashes, respectively, had the same meanings to Guatemala's armed forces. As a consequence of this disposition, the tactics and strategies of counterinsurgency became its *program*. Martínez de León writes: "All activity [... of the military was] shaped by the *binomial* insurgency - counterinsurgency", and "the explicit objective of the fight against insurgency is to prevent any transformation of the political, economic and social structures" (DEMAR: 13; my translation, my italics).

*The 'Implantation' of a Binary Code*

As our discussion of Guatemala's recent history suggested, the ideological orientation of Guatemala's armed forces between the early 1960s and the late 1990s was shaped in an evolutionary process decisively influenced by pseudo-feudalistic ideology in a first step and anti-Communist ideology in a second step. From the perspective of Luhmann's theoretical framework, the source of any kind of orientation on the part of an autopoietic system is its binary code. In the case of Guatemala's armed forces, it therefore appears to be appropriate to go beyond Luhmann's original conceptions and speak of an 'implantation' of a binary code.<sup>31</sup> The vast majority of the research literature supports the view that the responsibility for the more effective second step of this 'implantation' lies for the most part with the CIA and the State Department. The equation of national security with counterinsurgency, it can be argued, was tightly linked to the general anti-Communist and pro-US attitude generated by North American influence on Guatemala's armed forces.

These specific functional structures of Guatemala's armed forces were in operation through the entire civil war era. They are mirrored by its policies and activities at the time.

*Obstinacy in the Peace Process*

A success of the peace talks would not have meant anything less to the military than the withdrawal of its basis for autopoiesis. If national security had been provided otherwise, the *indispensable environment* for the military's self-reference and self-reproduction would have no longer existed. After all, counterinsurgency presumes - i.e., requires - insurgency. In other words: in a peculiar fashion, the military and the URNG were *structurally coupled*. The military of Guatemala as a social system could not adjust to a world without the *environmental contributions* from the URNG because that would have involved the observation of its own binary code, which would be a violation of the *'blind spot'*.

A factor that may have contributed to the protraction of the peace negotiations was the absence of *trust*. on the parts of both the military and the URNG. The *complexity* of the issue - i.e., Guatemala's 'national question' - could not be *reduced* to a shared problem definition that could have served as a starting point for a peace accord because either side accused the other of 'false consciousness' or deliberate deception of the public. In other words: as usual in highly ideological debates, both sides claimed a monopoly on common sense for themselves. As a result, not even the minimal 'risky advance concession' needed for a constructive

---

<sup>31</sup> I would like to thank Dr. Ilja Luciak for bringing my attention to the concept of 'implantation'.

dialogue was made - at least not on the part of the military. It hardly surprises that in a climate lacking any trace of mutual trust, the military preferred not to even talk - let alone listen - to the URNG.

As far as the military is concerned, the inability to come up with the element of trust needed for any kind of contractual transaction - in Emile Durkheim's famous words: 'the uncontractual element of the contract' - stems from the binary code 'implanted' in the 1950s and 1960s. The anti-Communist and anti-reformist overtone of the military's fundamental distinction and binary code simply put the URNG, along with any other form of reformatory or revolutionary activities, on the side of the 'other', the negative side of its operations of designation. It is part of Sociology's and Political Science's common sense that trust involves recognition. A social system can not invest trust in what is on the negative side of its fundamental distinction because it can not recognize this side as legitimate or acceptable. In so doing, it would pull what is on the negative side to the positive side. This would be the end of its system-specific mode of observation and - as a consequence of this - the end of its autopoiesis. By recognizing and trusting insurgent forces, Guatemala's armed forces would have relinquished their identity as the particular social system they were. In English: trusting the URNG or any other opposition group in any way would have meant self-denial and self-destruction to the particular type of institution the military of Guatemala was during the civil war.

#### *Political Oppression and Human Rights Abuses*

Judging from the only perspective available to them - their own *first-order observation* - Guatemala's armed forces could not consider any kind of reformist or liberal activity anything else but a threat to national security, invariably calling for military countermeasures. In other words: any activity even mildly challenging the existing order prompted the military of Guatemala - so to speak - to 'run its program'. As can be seen, the suppression of oppositional political activities of any kind was just another part of the military's program of 'total counterinsurgency', stemming from its binary code.

As opposed to the question of national security, the question of human rights was not an issue for the military of Guatemala. The limitations of its observation inhibited it from realizing that a strategy of counterinsurgency leaving thousands of civilians dead or deprived of their livelihoods was unacceptable. The integrity of the Guatemaltecos - with the notable exception of the elites - was not of any concern to Guatemala's armed forces. Their fundamental distinction and its binary code determined the single concern they were capable of:

national security, understood as the protection of the existing economic, political and social order. Their program, in turn, told them how to go about taking care of that concern: by quelling insurgence with counterinsurgency. These 'one-dimensional' functional structures of Guatemala's armed forces left no room for the protection of - or even for respecting - human rights.

The human rights issue can also be seen as a phenomenon of *meaning*. As we have seen, Luhmann conceives of meaning as a self-referential process of reiterated selections from within a system's self-created horizon of surplus references. In the military of Guatemala's self-created horizon of surplus references, stemming - as everything a social system processes - from its fundamental distinction, there was no room for the human rights issue. This issue had, in the most radical sense, no meaning. The military as a social system could never have selected a course of action with due consideration of the human rights issue because this aspect of military activity is not among the potentialities it could select as actualities. Since autopoietic systems can not transcend their horizon of surplus references, any reference to the human rights issue could only come from the military's environment. Alas, any communication of the human rights issue reaching the military from the outside invariably underwent the transformation from an external stimulus into an internal irritation, which means that the information conveyed by it was translated into the binary code of the system. Thus, the human rights issue *per se* never appeared within the logic of the armed forces; rather, it took the form of questions like: is due respect to human rights conducive or not conducive to national security through counterinsurgency? A 'change of mind' of Guatemala's military concerning the human rights issue - i.e., a change in the system's functional structures that would allow it to consider respect to human rights a positive value in its own right - could hardly happen without breaching the system's autopoiesis.

In a nutshell: the atrocities of the death squads became possible and continued to be possible - at least to a great extent - due to the military of Guatemala's peculiar binary code, which rendered the human rights issue meaningless<sup>32</sup> to it.

### *Militarization*

Supported by both the United States and domestic elites, both of which considered Guatemala's armed forces the only guarantor of - conservative, capitalist and pro-US - law and

---

<sup>32</sup> I would like to remind the reader that, in the context of autopoietic social systems, I am referring to meaning in Luhmann's non-emphatic 'systemic' sense.

order in the country, the militarization of Guatemala shaped a society in which the military was the paramount institution.<sup>33</sup> Each sub-system of Guatemala's society system was shot through with the functional structures of the military. The apparent lack of other institutions resourceful enough to prevent the country from sinking into anarchy - a point of view with which Jonas strongly disagrees (DALIA: 156-158) - allowed the military to become so hypertrophied that its source of meaning, the binary code that ties national security inseparably to counterinsurgency, crystallized into a *societal semantics*: All sectors of public life in Guatemala came to be governed by the exigencies of counterinsurgency. The semantics of counterinsurgency shaped the discourses of politics, economics and education. Martínez de León notes:

Más aún, el propio Estado es concebido por sus conductores como un aparato al servicio de la contrainsurgencia. (DEMAR: 13)

In the words of Luhmann's theoretical framework: with the semantics of counterinsurgency dominating the societal semantics of Guatemala, the entire society system became an adjunct to one of its sub-systems, namely, the armed forces.

#### *Racial Discrimination*

The human rights problem in the civil war era may have been aggravated by the pattern of *system differentiation* which brought about the present society of Guatemala. In today's Guatemala, the military is dominated by a *ladino* elite, whereas politics and economics are dominated by a ruling white minority. In contrast, the largest ethnic group in Guatemala, the *indígenas*, is virtually without access to power. In other words: within Guatemala's society system the system borders of the three pivotal sub-systems - military, economics and politics - appear to have developed fairly congruently with the borders of existing racial divisions. They are controlled by racially different classes or groups that do not share common values, norms, beliefs and goals. Both whites and *ladinos* have a vital interest in keeping the *indígenas* the underdogs of the Guatemalan society. Aside from that, the historically grown trenches between the two racial groups are extremely deep (BAGUA: 39-46). Because of these racial rivalries, a common ground for the creation of a fair political system - as a social system whose communication equally responds to all the voices in its relevant environment, including those of the *indígenas* - does not exist in the society of Guatemala. In this respect, not only the military, but all three pivotal sub-systems of Guatemala's society system lend

---

<sup>33</sup> This process is investigated in detail by Martínez de León (1994).

themselves to the concept of autopoiesis: all that binds these self-referential and self-reproductive systems together is a structural coupling<sup>34</sup> through interdependence in their joint oppression of the *indígenas*.

In the context of the above argument, it has to be reaffirmed that we have to draw a sharp distinction between classes or groups of actors and social systems. Neither is the elite controlling the economy to be mistaken for the economy as a social system, nor is the elite controlling the military to be mistaken for the military as a social system.<sup>35</sup> It appears to be only by looking at these elites, however, that we can hope to reach an understanding of the peculiarities in the binary codes and programs of the respective systems.<sup>36</sup> In the light of this insight, Luhmann's hope that the system perspective may both transcend and complement the perspectives of mainstream sociology, yielding 'surplus knowledge', appears to be justified.

### 3.2.2 Functional Structures and Individual Action

At this point, it has to be mentioned that the systems perspective adopted by Luhmann appears to deprive individual agents from the responsibility for their actions. This, however, is a misconception of Luhmann's theoretical reasoning. We have to keep in mind that social systems are systems of communication, not of action. The systems perspective eliminates actors and actions as components of the 'social' and instead perceives them as fabrications of communication. Hence, the theory of autopoietic social systems is simply 'blind' to the problem of individual responsibility. As a macroscopic theory of the 'social' it transcends the analytical unit of the individual; it is a theory of the supra-individual 'mechanics' we are all subject to as members of society. This does not mean, however, that it simply *denies* sub-

---

<sup>34</sup> Within the logical structure of Luhmann's theoretical framework, it is by no means a contradiction that the military of Guatemala is structurally coupled with its allies and its opponents at the same time. Quite contrarily, it is plausible that it needs both to sustain its autopoiesis.

<sup>35</sup> The fact that many of the first guerrillas in Guatemala were military officers shows that the functional structure of the military as a social system - which remained unchanged - does not necessarily reflect the opinions and attitudes of individual soldiers. In Luhmann's words, the military is a 'higher-level emerging order' vis-a-vis the individual soldier. This means: it is an entity of its own kind and in its own right. A social system, the theory of autopoietic social systems maintains, can never be broken down to lower-level entities.

<sup>36</sup> Admittedly, in so doing, a questionable 'contamination' of the systems perspective with a corporate actor perspective occurs. However, as the argumentative style of Luhmann's own social and political investigations suggests, some degree of 'impurity' appears to be inevitable and - for instance from a theory triangulation point of view - maybe even desirable. Any which way, this issue is a topic for another paper.



systemic issues like individual responsibility. Rather, it leaves these issues to other - potentially equally legitimate - theoretical perspectives.<sup>37</sup>

*Apologetic Rhetoric as a 'System Paradigm'*

The above line of argument implies that what looks like a mere rhetoric of justification - the assertion that the military is the only guarantor of internal stability - is actually something like a 'system paradigm' directly derived from the binary code. In more down-to-earth words: the individuals involved on either side - system or environment, i.e., military or citizens - may or may not believe in the system's cause, what counts is that the system (as a supra-individual social entity) 'believes' in it.

This 'belief' - i.e., *understanding* - of the military is a product of the military as a *system of communication*, guided by its binary code. Hence, while the actions of individual officers may not be explained with it, this is exactly where the mechanics of the military's behavior as a social system stem from. The atrocities committed in the name of counterinsurgency would not have been possible without this systemic behavior of the military, a behavior that may very well have deprived it, in crucial moments, of all human features. Sure enough, the systems perspective proposed by Luhmann does not help us understand why, within the military of Guatemala, individual actors acted the way they did. It does, however, help us understand the peculiar mechanics of social entities; a phenomenon that can not be satisfactorily explained as - or reduced to - the sum of all individual attitudes or actions and is only incompletely covered by what is known as 'group dynamics'. In other words: the perspective of the theory of autopoietic systems may enhance our understanding of the micro/macro gap in the social sciences. It may, to take the argument one step further, take us closer to answering the question "How is it possible that a group takes actions that each individual member

---

<sup>37</sup> It is crucial to note that Luhmann's universality claim is by no means a claim of absolutism. Luhmann (1971: 378) writes:

Mit Universalitaet ist nur behauptet, daß sich alle Tatbestände, im Falle der Soziologie alle sozialen Tatbestände, systemtheoretisch interpretieren lassen. Damit ist nicht gesagt, dass Systemtheorie die einzig mögliche oder die einzig richtige soziologische Theorie sei und dass andere Soziologien im Irrtum seien, wenn sie sich ihr nicht anschliessen.

The conception of a universal sociological theory by means of the conceptual framework of systems theory means that every social contact is perceived as a system (KNENAS: 33).

would refuse to take?" This means - with all due precaution - that it might take us just one step closer to understanding the phenomena of totalitarianism and fascism.

### 3.2.3 An Autopoiesis of Atrocity

In the light of Luhmann's theoretical framework the military of Guatemala's specific variation of the binary code national security/lack thereof and its transformation into recurring programs of counterinsurgency can be perceived as the phenomena responsible for the reiteration of the atrocities we observe throughout the recent history of Guatemala.

It does not make a difference whether atrocities are committed on the grounds of political weakness, as in the case of Lucas García in the 70s, or on the grounds of religious fanaticism, as in the case of Ríos Montt in the 80s. The atrocities committed by the military of Guatemala have occurred independently from the motives of the rulers in power. In this respect, the theory of autopoietic social systems is in conspicuous accord with the well known rule of functional independence of motives. The reiteration of atrocities was an integral part of the military's operations as a social system. It was, so to speak, an inevitable 'side effect' of its autopoiesis as the very specific institution that it was in the reactionary and civil war-torn time period between 1954 and 1997. In so far as this is the case, it might in fact be appropriate to speak of an 'autopoiesis of atrocity'.

## 4. Conclusions

The above investigation has undertaken the adventure of taking Niklas Luhmann's theory of autopoietic social systems and applying it to the military of Guatemala. In so doing, Luhmann's radical systems perspective was juxtaposed to the main stream perspectives of Martínez de León and Jonas. The analysis laid particular emphasis on two long-standing policies of Guatemala's armed forces in the civil war era: their extraordinary atrocities in the name of counterinsurgency and their remarkable obstinacy in the peace process.

### 4.1 Findings

The above analysis of Guatemala's recent history from the perspective of the theory of autopoietic systems demonstrated that the armed forces of post-1954 Guatemala - representing, in spite of its aforementioned particularities, a type of military institution typical for Latin America - qualify as an example of an autopoietic social system that can be used to illustrate and illuminate Luhmann's highly abstract and meta-theoretical conceptional framework. In addition, the analysis of the military's role in the political structures and processes of Guatemala - especially in the peace process - highlighted potential opportunities of creating 'surplus knowledge' by complementing the established canon of theoretical models in the social sciences with the systems perspective. Both findings not only strongly support Luhmann's universality claim but also demonstrate that his theoretical framework, often rebuked for being out of touch with the 'real world', can be made practical for case study research in Political Science.

Martínez de León, Jonas and Luhmann conceive of the military in substantially different fashions. Martínez de León conceives of it as a group of individual actors seeking to maintain their social and political status. Jonas conceives of it as a corporate actor seeking to maintain the power positions of international elites. Luhmann, finally, conceives of the military as an autopoietic social system with the binary code national security/lack thereof seeking to maintain its autopoiesis. The traditional perspectives - be it individual actor, corporate actor or dependency approaches - and Luhmann's systems perspective appear to yield overlapping results when used as tools of analysis in Political Science. In the above case study of Guatemala's armed forces, Martínez de León, Jonas and Luhmann - despite their diverging underlying definitions of the 'social' and the 'political' - lead the researcher to roughly the same findings in at least two cases:

- The military of Guatemala opposed the peace negotiations with the URNG because it depended on the civil war as its *raison d'être*.
- It was capable of a dirty war with scorched earth strategies of unprecedented proportions because of its internal structure and ideological orientation, both of which were shaped in an evolutionary process controlled by the State Department and the CIA in cooperation with domestic economic and political elites.

In the light of these shared perceptions it might actually not be so far 'off-base' to use Luhmann's theoretical framework as a tool of analysis.

## 4.2 Objections and Limitations

Nonetheless, some weaknesses and shortcomings have to be taken in consideration. A first issue could be seen in the support the findings lend to Luhmann's universality claim. In dispute of it, two diametrically opposed arguments could be launched. On the one hand side, it could be argued that the choice of the military of Guatemala as a single case and the lack of any comparison to other countries and their armed forces limits the versatility and applicability of the findings. On the other hand side, it could be argued that Luhmann's conceptual framework is so general that just about anything fits into it, not only rendering its applicability to the military of Guatemala hardly surprising, but also stripping it of any epistemological value. However, while it has to be conceded that the former criticism - to a certain degree - is valid, the latter could be rejected with the argument that, in the light of the above findings, Luhmann achieved exactly what he meant to achieve: a truly universal theoretical framework.

A second weakness of the investigation lies in the fact that, due to its limited scope, only a narrow selection of the broad array of epistemological and methodological issues arising from the encounter between Third World political problems and Luhmann's theoretical framework could be tackled. A lot of questions and problems had to be left aside. Since this paper tried to break new ground and to explore new horizons, it was inevitable that much remained 'half-baked' or blurry. It therefore has to be admitted that the findings of this paper can at best serve as 'search lights' or suggestions for future research.

As a third criticism, it could be argued that the models of thought constituting the established 'canon' of the social sciences still explain issues of the Third World better than Luhmann's provocatively 'off-beat' theoretical framework. From this point of view, this paper appears as just another paper that the world does not need. There are two arguments, how-

ever, that could be made in opposition to this point of view. For one thing, it is commonly accepted that, as respective research progresses, a research program may turn either progressive or regressive, suggesting its further pursuit or its cancellation. In other words: unless respective research is undertaken, it can not be established if the research program of analyzing Third World politics from the perspective of the theory of autopoietic systems is useful or not. Hence, for the time being, it deserves the benefit of doubt. Moreover, it has to be pointed out that, despite a strong enthusiasm for the enhancement and reformation of the theoretical social sciences on either part, neither Luhmann nor the author have any intention to suggest the indiscriminate abolition of well-tried models of thought and their replacement with the 'new kid in town': the theory of autopoietic social systems. The author - hoping to speak for Luhmann, too - merely wishes to convince the scientific community of the social sciences to accept the theory of autopoietic social systems as one useful model of thought among others.

A final - and maybe the most tricky - objection that could be made against the above investigation and its findings is the argument that, while the theory of autopoietic social systems can explain the military's obstinacy in the peace process, it can not explain the eventual signing of the peace accord between the authorities of Guatemala and the URNG. This argument, however, can be refuted by virtue of Luhmann's concept of *evolution*, which hitherto has merely been alluded to in passing. The limitations of this paper preclude any detailed discussion of this extremely complex concept. I will therefore only point out that Luhmann's social systems alter their functional structures in processes of socio-cultural evolution through "self-conditioning selection" (SOSY: 589). These erratic processes, in which system and environment mutually seek, avoid and influence one another, enable a system to overcome any given blind spot - i.e., any given basis for autopoiesis - through changes in its functional structures, which in turn - needless to say - produce a new blind spot with equal properties as the old one. Luhmann (1978: 422) writes:

[S]oziokulturelle Evolution [kann] begriffen werden als ein spezifischer Mechanismus für Strukturveränderungen, und zwar als ein Mechanismus, der 'Zufall' zur Induktion von Strukturen benutzt.

In an evolutionary process induced by erratic selections, the military of Guatemala could alter its functional structure and, by the same token, become a different social system with a different mode of autopoiesis.

*Questions for Luhmann*

However, the issue at hand casts light on a set of problems within Luhmann's theoretical framework. If, as the concept of evolution suggests, everything is in constant - and erratic! - flow, how can we unambiguously identify systems as functionally and structurally defined entities that extend through space and time? Aren't we, in spite of certain properties that seemed to remain fairly constant during the civil war, actually dealing with a different system every time we refer to another moment in the history of Guatemala's armed forces? Ultimately, in the constant decay of actuality Luhmann presumes, wouldn't every discernible social and political structure be so ephemeral that it does not even make sense to conceive of it as a system (a concept that, by definition, incorporates a certain element of stability)? Thinking the issue through, doesn't a concept of the 'social' based on constant erratic change render any attempt of analytical social science pointless?

In the light of these deliberations, the long-standing criticism that Luhmann's model of thought exhibits a certain apologetic and fatalistic overtone of the type 'whatever is must be' and is inherently conservative, appears to be - at least to a certain degree - justified.

As the press coverage suggests, the main reason why the military of Guatemala finally switched from a strictly confrontational policy towards the URNG to a willingness to negotiate was because - in a nutshell - the high command had turned from soldiers into businessmen (TE 1996, 1997, 1997a; The Wall Street Journal 1997). The increasing involvement of the *Banco del Ejército* and high-ranking military officers in large-scale financial transactions led to a change of mentality within the higher echelon of young officers, who had been checking the power of the "notorious old guard" (TE 1996: 42). Thus, we are dealing here with an *interpenetration* of two societal systems: military and economy. It is the intrusion of the economic system into the military system that contaminated the latter's fundamental distinction and binary code and thereby undermined its autopoiesis. In other words: the military of Guatemala as an autopoietic social system governed by a binary code that identified national security with counterinsurgency gave way to a military adjunct of the economic system, governed by the binary code of payment/non-payment. However, if this was the case, what happened to the original system? Wouldn't it have kept 'subliminally' existing as long as there is some remainder of its indispensable environment, i.e., political unrest that could be labeled insurgency? If so, where has its place been, how has it been manifesting itself? For a related matter, doesn't the apparent encroachment of the economy on the military suggest that the military has been under the influence of a multitude of systems all along? Ultimately: aren't we, in the case of Guatemala's - or any other - armed forces, dealing with an intersec-

tion of various systems rather than a genuinely 'militaristic' military system that could be singled out as unequivocally as attempted here?

These issues demonstrate that, despite the encouraging findings lined out in the preceding section, certain limits to the plausibility, applicability and usefulness of Luhmann's theoretical framework should not be overlooked.

### 4.3 Final Evaluation

This paper set out to investigate the political and military strategy of post-1954 Guatemala's armed forces from the perspective of the theory of autopoietic social systems. The primary objective of this endeavour was to illustrate and illuminate the opaque complexity of Luhmann's theoretical framework. Its secondary objective was to demonstrate the scope and limits of Luhmann's model of thought as an explanatory model guiding empirical research in the social sciences and, by the same token, seek support for the universality claim Luhmann makes for it. The possible opening of perspectives for the creation of 'surplus knowledge' about Third World politics through the application of Luhmann's radical systems perspective - which safely can be assumed to be a commonly accepted *desideratum scientiae* - was added as a tertiary objective.

In spite of the shortcomings and limitations discussed above, the null hypothesis of this paper - i.e., that the political and military strategy of Guatemala's armed forces during the 1960s-1990s civil war can *not* be described with the conceptual framework of the theory of autopoietic social systems - must be rejected. It could be demonstrated that Luhmann's concepts can be fleshed out by applying them to Guatemala's armed forces. In spite of some restrictions and ambiguities, their policies and activities during the armed confrontation with the guerrilla movement could be linked back to the functional structures they disposed of - and were governed by - as an autopoietic social system. These are, in essence: a system-specific fundamental distinction and a corresponding binary code, mode of communication and horizon of meaning.

These results suggest that the aforementioned objectives have - if not in full, at least in part - been attained. At any rate, weighing the claims against the objections and the strengths against the weaknesses, it seems justified to say that the above deliberations have at least accomplished the minimal objective of a research paper: to point beyond the horizon of common knowledge, suggest new avenues of thought, make a few points worth discussing and perhaps step - just a tiny little bit - on some people's toes.

## References and Bibliography

Acronyms were assigned to the most frequently cited works.

### A) Luhmann

- Bertalanffy, Ludwig von 1951:** Zu einer allgemeinen Systemlehre. 114-129 in: *Biologia Generalis. Archiv für die Allgemeinen Fragen der Lebensforschung* 19.
- RUS **Fuchs, Peter und Niklas Luhmann 1989:** Reden und Schweigen. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.
- Izuzquiza, Ignacio 1990:** La sociedad sin hombres: Niklas Luhmann o la teoría como escándalo. Barcelona: Anthropos.
- KNENA **Kneer, Georg & Armin Nassehi 1993:** Niklas Luhmanns Theorie sozialer Systeme: Eine Einführung. München: Fink.
- SOZA1-5 **Luhmann, Niklas 1970, 1975, 1981, 1987, 1990:** Soziologische Aufklärung, 5 volumes. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- Luhmann, Niklas & Jürgen Habermas:** Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie. Was leistet die Systemforschung? Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.
- Luhmann, Niklas 1978:** Geschichte als Prozeß und die Theorie soziokultureller Evolution. 413-440 in Karl Georg Faber & Christian Meier (eds.): *Historische Prozesse*. München.
- GS 1-3 **Luhmann, Niklas 1980, 1981, 1989:** Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik. Studien zur Wissenssoziologie der modernen Gesellschaft, 3 volumes. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.
- Luhmann, Niklas 1982:** The Differentiation of Society. New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press.
- AUSOBE **Luhmann, Niklas 1987:** Autopoiesis als soziologischer Begriff. 307-324 in: Hans Haferkamp & Michael Schmid (eds.): *Sinn, Kommunikation und soziale Differenzierung. Beiträge zu Luhmanns Theorie sozialer Systeme*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.
- VER **Luhmann, Niklas 1989a:** Vertrauen. Ein Mechanismus der Reduktion von Komplexität. 3rd, revised edition. Stuttgart: Enke.
- WISSG **Luhmann, Niklas 1990a:** Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.
- Luhmann, Niklas 1990b:** Political Theory in the Welfare State. Berlin/New York, N.Y.
- SOCYSY **Luhmann, Niklas 1995:** Social Systems. Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press.



- SOZSY **Luhmann, Niklas 1996:** Soziale Systeme. Grundriß einer allgemeinen Theorie. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.
- AUSY **Maturana, Humberto R. and Francisco Varela 1982:** Autopoietische Systeme. Eine Bestimmung der lebendigen Organisation, 170-235 in: Humberto R. Maturana: Erkennen. Braunschweig/Wiesbaden.
- AUSOSY **Schmid, Michael 1987:** Autopoiesis und soziales System: Eine Standortbestimmung. 25-50 in: Hans Haferkamp & Michael Schmid (eds.): Sinn, Kommunikation und soziale Differenzierung. Beiträge zu Luhmanns Theorie sozialer Systeme. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.
- LFORM **Spencer Brown, George 1971:** Laws of Form. London.

## B) Guatemala

- Beyhaut, Gustavo 1965:** Fischer Weltgeschichte, Band 23: Süd- und Mittelamerika II. Von der Unabhängigkeit bis zur Krise der Gegenwart. Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag.
- Iglesia Guatemalteca en el Exilio I.G.E, 1989:** Guatemala: Seguridad, Democracia y Desarrollo. Informe abierto sobre Guatemala.
- BAGUA **Jonas, Susanne 1994:** La Batalla por Guatemala. Caracas, Venezuela: Editorial Nueva Sociedad.
- DALIA **Jonas, Susanne 1996:** Dangerous Liaisons: The US in Guatemala. 144-161 in: Foreign Policy, Summer 1996, n103.
- DEMAR **Martínez de León, Luis Eduardo 1994:** La Democracia de las Armas. Gobiernos Civiles y Poder Militar. Guatemala, C.A.: Nueva Imagen Guatemala.
- Ramsey, Russel W. 1997:** Guardians of the Other Americas. Essays on the Military Forces of Latin America. Lanham, ML: University Press of America.
- TE (+yr.) **The Economist 1994:** NAFTA is not alone. p47-48 c1-3, June 18, 1994.
- TE (+yr.) **The Economist 1996:** At last. p42 c1-3, November 16, 1996.
- TE (+yr.) **The Economist 1997:** Central America opens for business. p35-36 c1-3, June 21, 1997.
- TE (+yr.) **The Economist 1997a:** Peace, maybe. p45-46 c1-3, January 4, 1997.
- TE (+yr.) **The Economist 1997b:** The peace police. p34-36 c3-1, June 28, 1997.
- The Wall Street Journal 1997:** Central America Goes From War Zone to Enterprise Zone. pA18 c1-5, September 25, 1997.

## C) Methods

- COHER **Bleicher, Josef 1980:** Contemporary Hermeneutics. Hermeneutics as a method, philosophy and critique. London/Boston/Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- DI **Dilthey, Wilhelm 1958:** Gesammelte Schriften (18 Vols.). Leipzig /Berlin: B.G. Teubner.

- Klemm, David E. (ed.) 1986a:** Hermeneutical Inquiry, Vol. 1: The Interpretation of Texts. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press.
- Klemm, David E. (ed.) 1986b:** Hermeneutical Inquiry, Vol. 2: The Interpretation of Existence. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press.
- WHTEXT **Ricœur, Paul 1986:** What is a Text? Explanation and Interpretation. 233-246 in David E. Klemm (ed.): Hermeneutical Inquiry, Vol. 1: The Interpretation of Texts. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press.
- CADE **Yin, Robert K. 1989:** Case Study Research. Design and Methods. Newbury Park/London/New Delhi: Sage Publications.

## Vita

### Jochen H.Ch. Kirsch

#### College Degrees

##### Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, Virginia

Master of Arts in Political Science

May 1998

Areas of specialization: international development, Central American politics.

##### Universität zu Köln, Germany

Magister Artium in Sociology, Education and Spanish

January 1997

Areas of specialization: market and rationality, theoretical Sociology.

#### Practical Experience

##### Employments

##### Gesellschaft für Software-Qualitätssicherung, Köln/Düsseldorf

from April until July 1997

Software Quality Assurance Consultant at the WestLB investment bank.

##### Max-Planck-Institute for the Study of Societies, Köln

from August 1995 until March 1997

WWW Editor and Internet Site Manager. Research Assistant.

##### Institute for Applied Social Research, Köln

from November 1994 until July 1995

Research Assistant.

##### Internships

##### Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Guatemala, C.A.

March 1996

Took part in an educational task force aiming at the foundation of a cooperative for *chicleros* in the *departamento de El Petén*. Assisted with the organization of panel discussions and conferences backing the peace process between the government and the guerrilla movement. Counseled co-workers regarding computer-mediated communication.

##### Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Carácas, Venezuela

from August until September 1992

Assisted with the planning and administration of excursions supplementing training seminars for union executives. Translated documents from and into English, Spanish and Dutch.