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Saggi

Conflict, Fear, and War as Constitutive Dimensions of Social Order[1]

Conflitto, paura e guerra come dimensioni costitutive dell'ordine sociale

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Abstract. This paper examines the complex and problematic relationship between conflict, fear and war, and highlights the role of such relationship in shaping state policies and social structures. Drawing on social systems theory and key analytical frameworks in international relations, the analysis adopts a broader theoretical perspective, interpreting states as complex adaptive systems that operate in response to security threats and global uncertainty. Ultimately, the article proposes a critical reading of the intersection between security, governance, and social order, shedding light on the political tensions that influence the strategies adopted by states in response to perceived threats.

Keywords: conflict, fear, war, social order, social systems theory.

Riassunto. Il contributo esamina la relazione complessa e problematica tra conflitto, paura e guerra, evidenziandone il ruolo nella configurazione delle politiche statali e delle strutture sociali. Facendo riferimento alla teoria dei sistemi sociali e ai principali quadri analitici delle relazioni internazionali, l'analisi si colloca entro una

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prospettiva teorica più ampia, interpretando gli Stati come sistemi adattivi complessi chiamati a operare in risposta alle criticità della sicurezza e alle condizioni di incertezza che caratterizzano lo scenario globale. L'articolo propone infine una lettura critica dell'intersezione tra sicurezza, governance e ordine sociale, mettendo in luce le tensioni politiche che attraversano le strategie adottate dagli Stati di fronte alle minacce percepite.

Parole chiave: conflitto, paura, guerra, ordine sociale, teoria dei sistemi sociali.

Introduction

As contemporary society lends itself to manifold conceptualizations, the social sciences have produced multiple representations of modernity. These representations, albeit diverse, seem to share a common feature: the global dimension of processes related to communication, science, politics, economics, and law. Yet, in the political realm, action largely remains within national boundaries, despite the existence of supranational entities, such as the European Union, and international organizations, including the United Nations and international courts. The national dimension continues to prevail, presenting the global scenario as a set of segments (states) that are firmly anchored in the assumptions of sovereignty that emerged between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. This explains the paramount importance that states attribute to the event that could threaten their very survival: conflict.

Conflict plays an unsurprisingly pivotal role in shaping state conduct. It is a fundamental ontological principle of social reality and, as such, a structural condition of political and social life. In this paper, conflict will be examined as a constitutive element of society, before focusing on war conflicts from a systemic perspective, with specific reference to Niklas Luhmann's theory. Indeed, this study mainly aims to analyse the experience of conflict in its various forms and levels, in contexts ranging from human nature to the social and national spheres, where it can assume its most disruptive configuration and escalate into total war. This will show how fear dictates state action, with the struggle for power driving international relations.

From this perspective, it becomes essential to consider how contemporary global dynamics reshape the traditional notions of conflict and power. The increasing interdependence of states within international institutions does not necessarily mitigate conflict, but rather transforms its modalities, often shifting tensions from direct military confrontation to economic, technological, and cyber domains. Furthermore, the fluidity

of contemporary threats (including terrorism, hybrid warfare, and geopolitical rivalries) calls for a re-evaluation of how states construct narratives of fear and security. By addressing these evolving dimensions, this paper seeks to highlight the enduring relevance of systemic conflict analysis for understanding the interplay between states, societies, and the mechanisms of global governance.

1. Socio-Political Evolution of Conflict

In the mixed polity of Roman political experience, different forms of conflict can be identified, including disputes, debates, and confrontations between rulers and people, classes, and those holding power in various capacities. A threshold not to be crossed ensured that conflict remained within the physiology of political life and was organized as if it were a dispute, without degenerating into stasis, or civil war.[2]

Reflection on conflict, understood as a component of political action, is grounded in the Greek tradition. However, during the Renaissance, significant changes began to occur in the processes related to conflict. The very concept of conflict evolved, and the use of quantitative methods in the study of conflictual phenomena in (organized) social life explicitly became a concern of politics.

From Machiavelli onwards, an original paradigm shift occurred that broke with a tradition traceable back to Greek philosophy, according to which communities are founded on human sociability, the desire for goodness, and the love of concord.[3] Machiavelli argues that conflict represents an existential condition, rooted in the opposition of moods, needs, and interests between antagonistic parties. The social dimension may be viewed as a form of politics, an open-ended and ever-moving configuration of conflict that draws on the Prince's drive and rational energy to bind individuals within an artificial sociability.[4] Conflict cannot be definitively resolved. It can only be regulated by institutional structures that provide it with an outlet.[5] No human community, however pacified, can neutralize the ambivalence of conflict, with continuous tension persisting between politics, unity, order, and discord.

Hobbes develops the idea of conflict around the natural inclination of human beings to pursue their own self-interest, an inclination that must

[2] Geuna, "Machiavelli ed il ruolo dei conflitti," 29.
[3] Ames, "Potere politico," 28.
[4] Machiavelli, *Il Principe*.
[5] Ames, "Potere politico," 228.

be regulated by a higher authority to ensure stability, peace, and security. In a context of great political turmoil, Hobbes conceives an idea of just and legitimate state and social order to which all individuals submit through the acceptance of a contract: the social covenant. In Book One of *Leviathan*, Hobbes describes the primitive human as a beast who, although endowed with reason, remains subject to instinct, fearing their neighbour intensely and desiring their elimination for the sake of personal survival.[6]

Hobbes's thought becomes particularly relevant in the early phase of Spinoza's political theory, in which the movement of one body is always explained by the movement of another, while ideas are always caused by other ideas (never by bodies), with this occurring in a constant dialectical process of confrontation and conflict. Not only are body and mind united, but, even before the issue of their union arises, they should be understood as a unity of difference.[7]

By contrast, Locke's view on conflict and human nature is more optimistic. He conceives of the state of nature as characterized by peace and tranquillity, with the social contract being only necessary to resolve conflicts between individuals.

For Hegel, reality consists of evolution, transformation, and change, through a dialectical movement in which negation and contradiction play a central role. Truth is the whole: in situations of conflict, it requires a systemic approach to complexity, considering the totality of the distinct parts that constitute the whole and the relations between them.

With evolutionists such as Malthus, Spencer, Darwin, Morgan, and Lorenz, the organizing principles of society and the dynamics of various forms of conflict are associated with the struggle for existence, survival strategies, and the dominance of the most capable, the "fittest." This implies that actors contend on behalf of social categories, striving to defend antagonistic interests. Conflictual action unveils, fosters, and strengthens the sense of social belonging among those who engage in competition.

Marx and Engels also draw on the studies of some evolutionists, including Darwin and Morgan. In terms of political and institutional conflict, Hobbes's and Rousseau's thought is grounded in the classical tradition of a politically defined society in which politics is still conceived of as the expression of the interests of the individual and the citizen. From Marx onwards, this perspective is no longer tenable, because politics,albeit necessary and essential, represents only a partial function within the

[6] Hobbes, *Leviathan*.
[7] Preite, *Lo Stato come organizzazione sociale*, 39.

broader set of social functions. It is only with Marx that reflection on politics acquires an objective institutional referent and stands outside a jusnaturalistic horizon, no longer aimed at ethically shaping institutional structures as the realization of cultural patterns of individual conduct.

The Marxian conceptual framework is primarily concerned with class conflict, particularly with a historical process in which visions and practices emerge that offer an alternative to the competitive and utilitarian ideology promoted by the market. Marx emphasizes the contradictions arising from the divergence between the relations of production based on private property, on the one hand, and the ability of knowledge and production practices to secure self-government for wage earners, on the other. This focus aims to enhance the political capacities of the proletariat, assigning it the task of suppressing the anarchic and irrational drives inherent in the oscillating dynamics of the capitalist cycle.[8]

Weber's perspective aligns with Marx's core tenets, although he maintains that the roots of inequality and the origins of conflict extend beyond the market, economy, and capitalism to include political, religious, anthropological, and cultural factors. Within the political sphere, individuals disseminate ethical or moral ideas and values through affiliation with, or the formation of, interest groups aimed at the control of power, including political parties and trade unions. Within the cultural sphere, individuals pursue specific interests related to ideals or design, often corresponding to their social class. Similarly, within the economic sphere, individuals share expectations and ambitions based on common material interests structured by social class.

In the mid-twentieth century, Parsons's structural functionalism, along with the robust empirical grounding of his studies, introduced critical elements into the reciprocity-based view of the interactions between the individual and society, and consequently also into the dynamics of social relationships and conflict. Parsons posits the existence of two distinct systems, the "personality system" and the "social system", which simultaneously function as part of, and environment for, each other.[9]

In the Parsonsian model, information flows unidirectionally, with the social system serving as the primary transmitter of information to the individual, rather than the individual influencing the social system. The transmission of information engenders the internalization of roles and the reworking of information, thereby integrating the individual into the system and shaping socialization. This transmission does not occur in the

[8] Benvenga and Bevilacqua, "L'eredità marxiana," 81.
[9] Parsons, *The Social System*.

reverse direction (from the individual to the system) because the system cannot assimilate personality; it can only receive motivational energy.[10]

In the late 1970s, the systemic field saw the emergence of new reflections rooted in second-order cybernetics, which moved the scientific debate beyond Parsons's theoretical speculations. During this period, the re-examination of Weberian thought offered a critical perspective on Marxian materialism and contributed to a more nuanced understanding of Parsonsian functionalism.[11] In this context, Luhmann's conceptual framework for understanding social systems begins to transcend the Marx/Parsons dichotomy.

2. Conflicts Between States and the Rise of War

The chronic persistence of conflict can result in the outbreak of war when the only perceived solution is total and violent confrontation. War differs from conflict in two key aspects. Firstly, war entails the complete annihilation of the adversary, whether on a physical or social level. Secondly, war is usually waged between two collective actors, each of which regards the other as the enemy and seeks to suppress its autonomy, eradicate its territorial roots, and appropriate its resources. War is thus an act of force aimed at compelling the adversary to submit to another's will.[12] Although wars may arise for multiple causes, which makes each case unique and deserving of study, some common traits can be identified that indissolubly link wars across different historical and geographical contexts.

One of the earliest wars to be accurately and comprehensively narrated is the Peloponnesian War, as described by Thucydides. His account was intended not only for immediate use, but also as a legacy for future generations, providing principles of human political action to guide judicious conduct.

Therefore, Thucydides's work lies at the intersection of philosophy and history. As a historian, he seeks to present facts accurately, while also conveying the general truths he perceives. For Thucydides, events and their narration are not ends in themselves, but means through which the historian can illustrate fundamental principles governing human history and politics.[13]

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[10] Baraldi, *Socializzazione e autonomia individuale*, 93.
[11] Preite, "Cyberspazio e forme di autodeterminazione," 149.
[12] Clausewitz, *On war*.
[13] Kagan, *Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War*, 372-374.

From the outset, Thucydides's work examines the underlying motivation for the Peloponnesian War: the formidable power achieved by Athens and the resulting apprehension of Sparta.[14] These two concepts, the distribution of power and the resulting fear, constitute the theoretical framework of the work. The causes cited by the parties, namely the issue of Epidamnos and the conflict between Corcyra (present-day Corfu) and Corinth, are immediately identified as mere *casus belli*. Initially established through conflicts with the Persians, the supremacy of Athens within the Delio-Attic league can be attributed primarily to the fear inspired by foreign powers, which shaped the Athenians' sense of decorum. Only later were their actions driven by concern for their own benefit.[15] In light of these circumstances, the Athenians were compelled to assume a firm and decisive leadership role to prevent the collapse of the empire, a course of action that the Spartans, occupying a similar position of power, would likely have pursued. This dynamic is intrinsic to the very nature of relations between rulers and the ruled.

It is therefore fear that determines the actions of the various actors within the international system. Fear of foreign powers motivated Athens to expand its empire, inevitably causing hatred and resentment among both allied and sovereign cities. Even Pericles, the most illustrious Athenian citizen and incomparable strategist, was aware of this, as evidenced in his speech before the Assembly during the plague, in which he affirmed the necessity of maintaining the empire.[16] The issue at stake was not merely independence from Spartan rule, but, above all, the loss of the empire and the consequent exposure of Athens to the intense hatred provoked by its domination. For Pericles, the empire was a form of tyranny, both illegal to conquer and risky to relinquish.[17] It was founded on violence and oppression, causing hatred among adversaries. Athens was compelled to maintain it to protect its interests. Abandoning the war would not only mean jeopardizing its independence, but also risking retaliation from those previously dominated.

Sparta had long been concerned about the growing strength of Athens. This concern began with Themistocles's directive to rebuild the city walls of Athens, following the expulsion of the Persians. Sparta's stated rationale for requesting a cessation of the fortification works was to prevent the potential occupation of well-defended strongholds by a future adversary (especially a returning Persian force) since a fortified Athens

[14] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*.
[15] *Ibid*.
[16] Meiggs, *The Athenian Empire*.
[17] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*.

could serve as bridgeheads for establishing control over the region. Nevertheless, the underlying rationale seems to lie in the Spartans' apprehensions that Athenian fortifications, combined with the maritime prowess Athens demonstrated at Salamis, would render the city invincible. This example also demonstrates that even a fortified structure intended purely for defence, such as a city wall, may be a source of concern, as it alters the balance of power between rival actors.

It can reasonably be assumed that the concept was perceived similarly also by all the other parties engaged in the conflict, regardless of their alliance with Athens or Sparta. The rebellion of Mytilene, an allied city of Athens and, along with Chios, one of the few cities enjoying special autonomous status within the Athenian empire, can be understood in this context. While addressing the Spartan Assembly to seek Spartan support, the Mytilenean envoys explicitly asserted that the balance of terror is the only condition under which an alliance can be safely maintained.[18]

This concept is exemplified in the discourse between Athens and Melos, a Spartan colony that, unlike other islands, was reluctant to submit to Athenian governance. The dialogue highlights the concern of Athens over potential hostility from its subjects. To maintain control and prevent defections, Athens needed to demonstrate its strength. Consequently, no islander could be allowed to escape Athenian authority, which made the conquest of the islands a security measure. However, imperial logic creates a vicious circle: the very act of conquest becomes necessary to maintain control, which in turn fosters further fear and hatred, causing insecurity and prompting additional expansion and control. This process, later described as imperial overstretch,[19] resulted in the downfall of Athens and numerous other empires throughout history. This has led international relations theorists to examine the boundaries between the pursuit of power and the maintenance of security for the survivability of a state.

As the primary objective of all states, the pursuit of security is inextricably interconnected with fear. Thucydides uses two terms to describe this emotional state: *phòbos*, denoting irrational fear, and *dèos*, signifying a rational type of fear based on reflection, calculation, and foresight.[20] *Phòbos* is associated with passion, emotionality, and irrationality, often foreshadowing adverse, if not catastrophic, consequences. Conversely, *dèos* represents the basis of reasoned decision-making, the central axis of Thucydides's narrative. From this perspective, states, as the primary actors in international relations, engage in rational power-seeking behaviours to

[18] *Ibid.*
[19] Kennedy, *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers.*
[20] Bluhm, *Causal Theory.*

secure their survival. This view of human nature, grounded in anthropological pessimism,[21] aligns Thucydides's thought with a strand of realism that also informs the work of Machiavelli and Hobbes.

Similarly, Machiavelli's *The Prince* bases its argument on fear as a foundation for security. The treatise poses the question of whether it is better for a ruler to be loved or feared. While both are desirable, the difficulty of combining them makes it far safer to be feared than loved when only one can be secured.[22]

Trust, whether rooted in affection, solidarity, or patriotism, ultimately rests on a covenant of gratitude, which individuals, selfish by nature, may break whenever they deem it advantageous. On the other hand, fear is sustained by the dread of punishment, thereby offering a single, reliable source of security.

In analysing the role and functions of the prince, Machiavelli situates them within a threatening environment in which the ruin of the state is a tangible and ever-present possibility. A situation of ongoing insecurity inevitably constrains the prince's political action and shapes his conduct towards his subjects. As Machiavelli observes, a ruler contends with two sources of fear: one internal, arising from his subjects, and one external, stemming from foreign powers. To defend himself, he should rely on both good arms and loyal allies. It follows that possession of good arms ensures the loyalty of allies. When the external situation is stable, the internal situation also remains so, unless disrupted by conspiracy.[23]

Consequently, the only viable equilibrium is one sustained by fear grounded in military strength, serving as the primary deterrent against both internal and external threats. This perspective is espoused by Hobbes, who conceptualizes Leviathan as a vital instrument for restoring order among human beings and the sole restraint against the anarchy of the state of nature. Hobbes, who also translated Thucydides's works, concurred with him that individuals are driven by distrust, glory, and competition.[24] In the state of nature, where there is no common power to maintain order, perpetual conflict exists between all individuals, a condition encapsulated in the formula *bellum omnium contra omnes*.[25] The same analogy extends to the system of states, which, in the absence of a common power to regulate them, remain perpetually exposed to potential war.

While individuals, through submission to Leviathan and the renunciation of *ius in omnia* (i.e., the right to do as one pleases), may succeed

[21] Bagby, "Use and Abuse of Thucydides."
[22] Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, 61.
[23] *Ibid*., 67.
[24] Bull, "Hobbes and the International Anarchy," 721.
[25] Hobbes, *Leviathan.*

in forming a social pact that ensures their survival and enables them to emerge from the state of nature, the same does not hold for states, which continue to exist in a state of nature. States retain their full autonomy and freedom, acting at their own discretion to pursue their interests. As a result, they exist in perpetual anarchy and recurrent conflict, constantly preparing for warfare in a gladiatorial fashion.[26]

The concept of war is not limited to the actual act of combat, but it also includes the period preceding it, when the will to fight is evident and states are prepared to engage. This implies that each sovereign state is concerned with maintaining its independence and security.

The anarchy between states, which later thinkers such as Kant[27] attempted to overcome, persists because the incentive to submit to an international Leviathan is weaker than it is for individuals. States are less fearful of being vanquished in direct confrontation, as they are significantly less vulnerable to attack than individuals. The necessity of relinquishing the "right to everything" in the state of nature to submit to an international authority is not universally acknowledged, which results in a perpetual state of war. States are compelled to adopt all necessary measures to safeguard their interests and protect themselves against external attacks.

It follows that a basic principle governing international relations is the concept of interest, defined in terms of power.[28] In the Weberian sense, this refers to the control of the thoughts and actions of others. In international relations, it manifests in economic, military, and political forms. In the context of interstate relations, military power is of paramount importance, as it provides the means to engage in warfare and ensure the survival of the state. This facilitates a rational understanding of politics, while encouraging moderation and prudence. Abstaining from a foreign policy driven by ideology and principles, which inevitably results in the demonization of the enemy and the pursuit of ideological crusades, makes it easier to recognize the legitimate interests of other states, allowing for a more tolerant stance and the formulation of compromise policies that serve the interests of both parties. Consequently, the actions of the actors involved in the international system should be assessed in terms of their utility for the distribution of power. Actions that do not result in a net gain of power are not in a state's interest and should be avoided. Conversely, excessive growth in a rival state's power can pose a significant threat to the survival of another state. Therefore, it is crucial to pursue a balance of power,

[26] Bull, "Hobbes and the International Anarchy," 721.
[27] Kant, *To Perpetual Peace*.
[28] Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*.

defined as a distribution of power capable of preventing the dominance of a single actor and its hegemony.

The various forms that balance can take (including alliances, rearmament, and a divide-and-conquer strategy) give rise to power relations between units that are inherently unstable and transient. The actors involved should thus continually re-establish this balance. The balance of power cannot be assumed to be an inevitable outcome of the dynamics of the international system, being rather a strategic decision that states should actively implement. It can mitigate the security dilemma, without eradicating it entirely.[29] In an environment where multiple interconnected groups live in close proximity without forming a superordinate unit, the pursuit of individual security inevitably creates a vicious cycle. The desire for enhanced security motivates each group to expand its own power, thereby strengthening its ability to withstand the influence of other groups. However, this generates the perception of heightened insecurity in other parties, which in turn seek to increase their own power. In a world of competing units, no actor can feel completely secure, which triggers a vicious cycle of security competition and power accumulation.

3. Conflict and Democracy in the Thought of Niklas Luhmann

Luhmann's social systems theory may be regarded as an alternative perspective to classical theory and the conceptual frameworks of advanced modernity developed by Marx, Weber, and Parsons, particularly with respect to the dichotomous pair integrationism/conflictualism.

Luhmann's approach represents a departure from the conception of conflict inherent in Marxist thought. It posits that social conflict arises from communicative events that are contingent and highly improbable. This stands in contrast to Marxian theory, which, viewing the evolution of social systems through a conflictual lens, suggests that outcomes are largely predetermined. By contrast, Luhmann treats the evolution of social systems probabilistically, highlighting the contingent and highly improbable conditions of social reality. While in the Weberian model individuals exist within a social system as a unified entity, Luhmann's conceptual framework presents a desubjectivized perspective, de-emphasizing the role of the social actor as the primary motivational and intentional centre of social action. Rather, it is individual actions that shape one's involvement in specific social systems.

[29] Herz, "Idealist Internationalism."

Luhmann's systemic approach transcends the ontological challenge inherent in the concept of society by acknowledging the existence of social entities that maintain their own identities, thereby affirming their status as systems. This perspective also marks a departure from the Parsonsian framework, which perceives structure as fixed and synchronous. In contrast, Luhmann assigns a crucial role to the dynamic, processual, and diachronic nature of functions. With the publication of *Soziale Systeme* in 1984, he definitively revised Parsons's conception of the relationship between systems by introducing the notion of structural coupling. This framework overcomes the asymmetry of the Parsonsian model by situating the individual within their social context, thereby enabling the analysis of the functional specificity of communication within systems and the capacity of psychic systems to produce knowledge through communication. Therefore, phenomena such as love, education, power, money, faith, and scientific truth can be understood as specific forms that, at the communicative level, provide evidence of their respective systems and distinguish them from the external environment.

In the political sphere, democracy is often regarded as a system of governance that embodies the principles of shared and participatory communication, although this has yet to be fully realized in practice. Similarly, in economics, the market is viewed as a mechanism for individual autonomy, yet outcomes remain constrained by the limited rationality of actors. In law, norms and sanctions function as instruments for ensuring security and protection, yet disputes continue to arise, often beyond the control of legal frameworks.[30]

Conflict can be said to exist whenever a communication is contradicted, or whenever a contradiction is communicated. In this sense, the existence of conflict is contingent upon the presence of two communications that stand in mutual contradiction. Conflict thus assumes the role of autopoiesis, the continuation of communication over a period of time.[31]

In other words, Luhmann regards conflict as a potential outcome of communication. From this perspective, conflict does not indicate a failure in communication, but it rather represents an expression of rejection that simultaneously affirms a shared communicative code. This does not necessarily lead to a breakdown in the dialectical relationship, but gives rise to specific forms of social relations.

Luhmann's thought, and the interpretive framework derived from it, grounded in the concepts of autopoiesis and self-referentiality, has influenced all areas of social conflict. A central assumption of social systems

[30] Preite, "Cyberspazio e forme di autodeterminazione."
[31] Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme*.

theory is that systems preserve their autonomy from the environment in which they operate. For instance, a given event may belong simultaneously to a social system (as communication) and a psychic system (as thought), even though each system constitutes part of the other's environment.[32]

The difference between system and environment is the foundation of social systems theory. A system cannot exist independently of its environment, since it comes into being by drawing an operational boundary that separates it from what does not belong to it. This boundary stabilizes the order within which the system reduces complexity, enabling it to address relevant problems. The function of understanding and reducing the complexity of the world and its evolution defines social systems. In advanced modernity, society is exposed to the excessive simultaneity of events: everything happens at once in a present that cannot be observed in its entirety.[33] No system can absorb this totality, which explains why systems differentiate functionally, developing their own specificity in relation to the external environment. Through this process of differentiation, each system operates according to its own code and makes selections through a symbolically generalized medium of communication, such as power for politics, money for the economy, faith for religion. Communication is the core operation of social systems. It produces both information and meaning, which recursively provide the premises for further communication.[34] In social systems theory, communication is an event without duration: it is always new, and its continuous production generates ever-changing meanings. Without communication, social systems cannot exist.[35]

In the context of conflict, communication is an improbable event, characterized by three distinct forms of improbability: (a) the improbability of being understood; (b) the improbability of reaching its addressee; and (c) the improbability of being accepted.[36] Within systems theory, these forms are addressed through: (a) language, which increases the probability of understanding; (b) means of dissemination, which increase the probability of reaching the addressee; and (c) symbolically generalized media of communication, which increase the probability of acceptance. Complexity thereby becomes a defining feature of the system, which manages it selectively and thus reduces it. Accepting this premise entails studying the system as autopoietic, that is, operationally closed. Operational closure is decisive for understanding how systems remain open to the environment: closure is only "operational", meaning that the system translates environ-

[32] Preite, "La società come sistema."
[33] Longo, *L'ambivalenza della modernità*, 103-105.
[34] Baraldi, *Socializzazione e autonomia individuale.*
[35] Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme.*
[36] Baraldi, Corsi, Esposito, "Luhmann in glossario."

mental inputs, "irritations", into its own operations. This is how all social systems function, as it can be seen in the political system and its phenomenological domain of political decision-making.[37]

In other words, the system can self-produce the elements that constitute it, and is also self-referential in that it can self-produce its constitutive features and organization. Autopoiesis and self-referentiality make the system autonomous both structurally, as it continues to exist even under strong external pressures, and operationally, since it functions in relation to the simultaneity of its own operations, within a present whose future remains indeterminate. Every social system is situated within an environment that encompasses everything that is external to the system itself, including the natural environment and human beings, whose psychic systems and bodies are autonomous entities differentiated from social systems.

In the context of politics, conflict and communication serve as instruments for differentiating between political options. A political option involves both the selection of an interpretive framework and the determination of decision-making processes. This approach transcends traditional dichotomies, such as capitalism versus socialism. Within this framework, democracy is viewed as an evolutionary possibility of the political system, despite remaining an "improbable" one.[38]

Contemporary accounts of democracy emphasize the discrepancy between theoretical and practical aspects of democratic governance. This includes the divergence between an idealized notion of democracy and its real-world manifestations, as well as the gap between theoretical policy agendas and their tangible outcomes. In this context, the question of fundamental rights becomes highly complex, as rights are a prerequisite for maintaining the separation between systems and preserving mutual autonomy.[39] The establishment of fundamental rights provides a stabilizing influence on the relationship between the political and social orders, preventing the two from overlapping or becoming confused. The values of freedom, equality, and justice are no longer merely guiding principles for political action; they also serve as limiting factors, ensuring that the political system retains its autonomy and distinct function.[40]

However, this "limitation" does not imply that political decisions are necessarily irreversible. Indeed, in a democracy, decisions that have already been taken may be subject to continual revision, thereby maintaining the potential for selection and change within the political sphere.[41]

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[37] Preite, "La società come sistema."
[38] Luhmann, *Politische Theorie*.
[39] *Ibid*.
[40] Maresch, *Unsere Zukunft hängt von Entscheidungen ab*.
[41] Luhmann, *Politische Planung*.

This process is grounded in a rationality inherent in the system that is functional to its stability. In this context, values, norms, and conflict are relevant not to individuals themselves, but to the role they play within the system. This approach thus transcends traditional political theories that interpret society in an evaluative, utilitarian, or formalistic manner.[42]

Luhmann posits that the social system does not incorporate the concrete individual, but excludes them, showing that society is neither a legal contract nor an institutional construct. Rather, it represents an objective level of development that takes place independently of individual intentions.[43] Consequently, democracy is not a form of domination, but a technique for controlling the system, which operates through the positivization of law.[44] In this sense, democracy constitutes a method for managing the inherent complexity of society through the continuous process of decision-making, even amidst conflict.

The durability of a democratic system depends on its capacity to reach consensus on fundamental principles, rather than unanimity on specific programs or values. Social differentiation creates processes of inclusion and exclusion, to which the political system can only respond by addressing the relevant issues directly.[45] However, cross-cutting differences may give rise to dystopian and undemocratic conflict.

Nevertheless, the process can be regulated, provided the underlying operational codes remain uncompromised. The political system, which is linked to law through constitutions, enables the ongoing development of political potential and the management of social complexity.[46] Even so, conventional definitions of politics (such as state, power, and decision) are now anachronistic. Modern politics is becoming increasingly decentralized, which is making it challenging for institutions to respond to expectations from below. Consequently, decisions are becoming ever more specific, largely due to the inability of the system to achieve the desired universality of law.[47]

With regard to the level of conflict, a shift has occurred from positive law, defined by a distinct authority that is competent to legislate, to a form of *voluntas* that emerges from specific groups negotiating individual decisions that do not achieve general applicability. In the former case, positive law is selected by the state on a political basis. By contrast, the dissolution of the separation between state and society, resulting from hyper-legaliza-

[42] Preite, "Sistema politico, istituzioni democratiche," 151-152.
[43] Luhmann, *Rechtssoziologie*.
[44] Accarino, "Luhmann, Niklas," 483.
[45] Preite, "Sistema politico, istituzioni democratiche," 153.
[46] Luhmann, *Politische Theorie*.
[47] Preite, *Sistema politico, istituzioni democratiche*, 154.

tion and the expansion of the public economy, has given rise to a form of law that is created indirectly by extra-institutional bodies.[48] This non-state law develops in economic, labour, managerial, and professional contexts. At the social level, it transforms politics into a field of activity that is no longer primarily state-centred. The traditional political centre has ceased to exist due to the inability of the political system to direct, coordinate, or govern other elements according to a predefined plan. Conversely, it takes the form of a circuit of relations in which the parties themselves organize and control political structures, thereby producing a system devoid of a dominant centre. Such a system is no longer compatible with traditional political theories based on an authoritarian centre and hierarchical models.[49]

In this context, the real power dynamics in modernity are represented by bargaining, conflict, dissent, and support for political decisions, which mainly occur through informal channels. The concept of a centralized, separate authority capable of exercising legal coercion exclusively and absorbing conflict is no longer applicable. Power depends on a multiplicity of disruptive, self-legitimizing factors, which reflects a fragmentation of political control.

Conclusion

In the international system, the lack of a universally recognized authority capable of hierarchically organizing society, combined with the increasing improbability of communication among actors with strongly divergent values, cultures, and traditions, leads to conflict easily escalating into real wars. The anarchic nature of the international system precludes the democratic mechanisms that could absorb or mediate conflict, while the security dilemma further complicates communication.

From a systemic perspective, the absence of a central authority means that each state functions as an autonomous political system, translating external events into its own decision-making code, while preserving its structural identity. Autopoiesis explains how political systems reproduce themselves internally, while self-referentiality accounts for the persistence of divergent strategic perspectives even under conditions of economic and technological interdependence. These properties make the systemic approach particularly effective in explaining the resilience of competitive dynamics and the difficulty of achieving lasting coordination at the global level.

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[48] Prospero, *La politica moderna*, 198.
[49] Preite, "Sistema politico, istituzioni democratiche."

If the positivization of international law depends on the will (or, in some cases, the chance) of states to comply with the rules they establish and occasionally share unanimously, the stabilization of expectations appears incredibly fragile. The struggle for power, the arena par excellence of the political system, aims at completely colonizing every other system, beginning with the juridical system and its code based on justice. Consequently, the lack of functional differentiation becomes the defining feature of the international system during its most critical phases, when even the continued existence of its constituent units is called into question.

Dèos, the rational type of fear grounded in reflection, shapes the dichotomous code of the international political system, in which every decision, whether taken or avoided, is influenced by fear as the emotional correlate of expected violence.[50] In this context, the security dilemma remains an inherent feature of the international system: measures implemented by one state to enhance its security inevitably generate perceptions of threat in others, perpetuating a cycle of mistrust and competitive power accumulation. If conflict characterizes human action, it becomes imperative to adopt strategies that prevent its escalation into outright war. A systemic understanding of political communication, combined with awareness of the risks posed by ideological distortions that obstruct such communication, can guide the design of more realistic pathways towards a stable and peaceful international order.

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[50] Sofsky, *Traktat über die Gewalt.*

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