

SYSTEMS THEORIES IN GLOBAL AND TRANSNATIONAL CONTEXT: A REVIEW ESSAY

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Abstract: This essay offers a critical assessment of recent arguments about the relevance of systems theory and considers such interpretations, examined under the light of global and transnational scholarship. The significance of tracing the relationship between the Ancient Roman concept of *Societas* and the modern notion of society is highlighted. The reconstruction of the interpretative schemes outlined by Parsons, Habermas and Luhmann is similarly appraised. The extent to which systems theory can yield significant results when applied to global and transnational context is critically examined.

Keywords: systems theories, world society, globalization, grand theory, sociology.

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An emeritus professor at the National University of Singapore, Volker H. Schmidt is an exceptionally strong advocate of “systems theory” or of thinking about society as a social system. Usually disparaged as “grand theory” (Mills 1959) this approach is among the least popular forms of sociology in the 21st century. Popularity is not necessarily a valid measure of worth; and the author puts forth a most elegant defense of “grand theorizing”. At the same time, the first half of his book *From Societas to World Society: Genealogy of a Concept* (Brill, 2025) offers a fascinating and useful historical reconstruction of the origins of the concept of “society”. This is an original study on its own right. It is unfortunate that it is paired with the author’s broader argument in favor of a particular version of “grand theory”. Academic audiences are likely to avoid a book tainted by association with a defunct paradigm. In turn, the author might have hoped that the opposite could be the case, namely, that readers attracted to his genealogy of “society” might also be tempted to read the rest of the book. But in the partisan and over-politicized intellectual climate of the 21st century, such an assumption appears exceedingly optimistic.

Being a work in the tradition of “German social theory” or social philosophy, the book is appropriately praised by Claus Offe, Thomas Gutmann, B.S. Turner and Raf Vanderstraeten. This review attempts to both reconstruct some key arguments set forth in the book’s pages, albeit in crude summary format; as well as to scrutinize some of the most questionable ideas. Hopefully, readers can distinguish between the two – there is much that is valuable in the book’s pages, but there are also assertions and omissions that should be critically examined. Additionally, the book elaborates the notion of “societalization” (association or *Vergesellschaftung*), which has its roots in Georg Simmel’s work. In the 21st century, this notion has been employed by Jeffrey Alexander (2018) with his thesis about the “societalization of social problems”. Schmidt (2020) has penned an informative overview of several theories of “societalization”, suggesting that this concept has a long history and insinuating that Alexander’s use is not entirely unproblematic. This notion relates to processes of constituting the “social” through interaction and/or communication with others.



The book is divided into four parts. In the first two parts, there is a historical reconstruction of the emergence of the term “society” – while the book’s second half presents four sociological interpretations of “society” and traces the repercussions of globalization for transforming arguments about a “national society” into a general thesis about a “world society”. In Part I, the discussion goes back to Ancient Rome to track the origins of the Roman notion of *societas*, which could take a variety of forms, political, military or civil. Then, the discussion proceeds with a consideration of *societas civilis* during Western Europe’s Middle Ages, inclusive of a discussion of the manner this concept was addressed in that era’s legal, theological and philosophical thought. These first two hundred pages of the book are by far the most original. The author should be praised for offering such an illuminating analysis of the concept, which updates and supersedes Simmel’s highly insightful statements about the origins and uses of the term “society”. If the book’s first two hundred pages were published independently as a monograph on the intellectual (pre-)history of “society” that alone could have been a work of great relevance for sociologists and intellectual historians. The word “genealogy” used in the title might mislead readers to think of the author’s approach as having an “elective affinity” with Foucault’s archaeology of knowledge. This allusion is completely unjustified. The author’s approach belongs to the history of ideas or intellectual history and looks for continuity instead of discontinuities.

Just like in his preview article (Schmidt 2025b), the author centers his interpretation on the existence of two blueprints: that of the general model of the *societas* and the subcategory of *societas civilis*, respectively. Unsurprisingly, the history exhibits remarkable continuity, just as the author states. The author highlights this historical dependence of social theory on civil society (Schmidt 2025a: 75-77). He claims that the social sciences appear cognizant only of *societas civilis*, which, under the guise of the nation-state, has been adopted as the default model of “society”. The late Liah Greenfeld (1954-2026) has further explored this relationship in her work (see Greenfeld 2026). Readers might want to combine her theses with the argument set forth in this book, for it leads to an insightful historical



interpretation. The book's Part II narrates in broad strokes the intellectual history of civil society all the way to Talcott Parsons – since, according to the author, after Parsons, “no room was left for societies other than the national society” (Schmidt 2025a: 100). The author covers in a single chapter the “social contract” theories of Johannes Althusius, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Herbert Spencer. The chapter is meant to highlight the gradual rise of “civil society” as the dominant concept in the West's political thought. It is followed by a chapter on Ferdinand Tönnies, discussing at length the famous distinction between society (*Gesellschaft*) and community (*Gemeinschaft*). In Part II's concluding chapter the author examines the understanding of “society” in the works of Max Weber and Émile Durkheim – two of Sociology's classical founders.

The author's Eurocentric biases should be noted, as these make him an almost irresistible target for de-colonial criticism. In his narrative, the Middle Ages begin with the collapse of the Roman Empire, which the author treats as a self-evident fact. Historians know that this half-truth has long been incorporated into the West's narrative. The author acknowledges that it was only the western part of the Roman empire that collapsed. Emperor Justinian I, whose legal codification was extremely influential in later centuries (Schmidt 2025a: 58), reconstructed most of the empire during his reign. But even when the Romans eventually lost control of Italy to the Lombards, the eastern part of the Roman Empire persisted. McCormick (2008: 417) remarks: “In Constantinople, Charlemagne's coronation [in 800 A.D.] appeared as the latest in a long series of Italian usurpations”. The Empire's actual existence was terminated at the hands of the crusaders of the Fourth Crusade in 1204 (brief overview in Roudometof 2014: 44-50). This is not mentioned here merely for critique. For various forms of association existed in the eastern Roman Empire and similar forms existed within the Islamic Empire that superseded the Roman empire in the Fertile Crescent. Nothing is mentioned about these empires. Just because “civil society” is etymologically traced back to Ancient Rome does not mean that such associations (civil or political or military) were non-existent elsewhere. Yet, this is



the conclusion that the reader might mistakenly draw from the text. In other words, the proper consideration of the various associational forms needs to incorporate non-Western developments. There is scant acknowledgment of such processes in the book's pages. Instead, the book is dominated by an "internalism" that has been identified as one of Sociology's perennial sins (Bhambra 2016). At least, the author notices the active role of such societies in spearheading European colonization (Schmidt 2025a: 77-80).

Perhaps the most lucid and nearly fascinating part of the book comes – rather unexpectedly – in Part III. It is devoted to presenting the theories of Parsons, Habermas, Luhmann and Bourdieu. The odd man here is Bourdieu; while delivering a solid summary of his main ideas, it is hard to connect the central tenets of his approach to the rest of the people in the list. The author succeeds in a task that has long eluded numerous others – namely, he manages to present the other three theorists in an eloquent, lucid and interesting manner. It is true that this kind of "Talmudic exegesis of texts" has been a long-standing target for criticism. However, given the rather notoriously abstract and difficult vocabulary that these theorists employ, this is no easy task. This is perhaps the most useful part of the book's second half. If instructors are looking for a rather short but sophisticated presentation suitable for an upper-level undergraduate or graduate level course, this portion of the book is perhaps the best one can find. It takes a great deal of skill to render abstract theorizing into normal language and the graphs and tables used by the author help a great deal to communicate the similarities and differences among the three main authors under consideration. There is no doubt of course about the conclusion: although his work is not widely circulated in the Anglo-American cultural universe, the late Niklas Luhmann (1927-1998) has developed the most sophisticated and well-thought-out model or blueprint, one that clearly overtakes Parsons and is superior to Habermas.

Part IV is called "Globalization and the emergence of world society" but there is almost no meaningful discussion of the emergence and different conceptions of globalization as such (for a summary, see Roudometof 2016a: 5-13). The author



correctly identifies the problem of methodological nationalism as a major issue of scholarly concern. However, he mistakenly credits the late Ulrich Beck (1944-2015), who merely popularized the phrase at the turn of the 21st century, instead of Martins (1974) who is the person that introduced this notion into sociology. The author further correctly identifies the problem of “society-centeredness” as a major issue that emerged in the second half of the 20th century. However, he inaccurately claims that this was ignored by the mainstream. The notion of “global sociology” (Moore 1966), already introduced in the 1960s, suggests otherwise. Initially introduced in the 1970s, world system analysis was an explicit effort to inquire into “inter-societal” dynamics that insisted on negating the image of the isolated, reified “society” (see Wallerstein 1979). Only some years later, Tilly (1984) powerfully critiqued the entire mentality and the concepts involved in “grand theorizing” (inclusive of “society”). In Sociology, dependency theory and the cultural imperialism thesis, both popular since the 1970s, have been influential (Frank 1967; Tomlinson 1991). What the above suggests is that the concern with inter-societal phenomena has been far less peripheral to social scientific inquiry than insinuated by the author.

Next, there is the issue of addressing the notion of globalization – which is reasonably expected to be something readers of this journal are particularly interested in. Globalization was introduced in the discipline of sociology in the early 1980s by the late Roland Robertson (1938-2022) (1992). It was popularized after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, and its popular version is not always in agreement with its scholarly understanding. Robertson’s notion of globalization was articulated in relation to the slow and gradual elaboration of the empirical and theoretical work of the so-called “Stanford school” of sociological neo-institutionalism – that is, the group of scholars and researchers associated with Stanford’s Prof. J. Meyer.

In the book, the author addresses Meyer’s theoretical writings on world society almost exclusively via an edited volume by Krücken and Drori (2009). He fails to consider the long cumulative record of research on this problematic (see Boli, Thomas 1999; Drori *et al.* 2013; McNeely 1995; Meyer *et al.* 1997; Thomas *et al.* 1987; Meyer, 2007, 2010; Lechner, Boli



2005). In Meyer's world society theory, institutional isomorphism is the principal mechanism that shapes adaptation and proliferation of various organizational blueprints on the world stage. That accounts for uniformity across state boundaries, irrespective of political or ideological differences among different states. To this argument about uniformity the researchers working within this perspective have added numerous subprocesses that entail adaptation and variation because of organizational adjustment.

This research agenda accounts for the globalization of culture in ways that directly clash with the Westernization and cultural imperialism theses. Robertson (1992) has added an important additional ingredient, namely, that – in addition to homogeneity – globalization brings forth the proliferation of cultural heterogeneity. In this regard, Robertson's argument is the mirror opposite to the McDonaldization thesis (Ritzer 1993), which later mutated into the "globalization thesis" (Ritzer 2003; for a critique Roudometof 2016b). Robertson's (1995) introduction of the key term "glocalization" into sociological discourse highlights precisely the propensity for fusion and hybridity strengthened *because* of globalization. All that is lost to the author, who offers brief, elementary and unsatisfying overviews of the theories of Meyer and Wallerstein (Schmidt 2025a: 271-285). These two serve merely as strawmen for the author to reintroduce his favorite Niklas Luhmann as *the* meaningful alternative (Schmidt 2025a: 285-308). It is only in the book's conclusions (Schmidt 2025a: 315-330) that the author finally comes to terms with the limitations of Luhmann's own theory; and suggests his own modifications that could be applied to render the theory viable – at least according to the author's interpretation.

Suffice to say, the author treats the key issue of whether world society theory is verifiable by or could be meaningfully connected to empirical research in just a few pages (Schmidt 2025a: 289-293). Not only is his assessment of empirical reality debatable, but his approach conflates two distinct dimensions of globalization – interactive and integral (see Roudometof 2020). When globalization operates as integral it leads to the construction of a new complete unit or a whole (like the "world society"). When it is merely interactive, it involves multiple

interactions among local actors without such a movement – whereby the multitude of interactions might be transnational or trans-cultural or hybrid or glocal or trans-border, yet these interactions may not lead inexorably or inevitably to new layers or strata. The author fails to acknowledge the theoretical significance of the gap between these two dimensions – an issue that cannot be overcome in an *ad hoc* manner or *ex cathedra*.

The above-mentioned distinction reflects the broader central issue with the author's arguments as well as with the entire scholarly tradition of "grand theory" – namely, that the relationship between theory and empirical reality becomes almost an afterthought. This is the standard criticism of this entire genre, usually summed up in the unkind phrase "armchair sociology". Systems theories propose (what in effect are) abstract philosophical systems. Such systems can be judged on their own right, in terms of the craftsmanship of their analytical construction. In this regard, Luhmann's is perhaps the most elegant one. But the real issue is whether actual research can meaningfully interact with such systems. In part, it is the insulation of "systems" thinking from the "dirty work" of empirical inquiry that has led to their lack of popularity. As Elias (1982) argued, the central drawback of this entire scholarly genre is the reduction of social processes into social states – whereby concepts are seen as a-historic analytic constructions that are applied into the real world.

Apart from devotees, then, few people are going to be persuaded to revive "systems theory". Still, the book offers a marvelous requiem to grand theory's lost dream. It is an elegant narrative, seductive and beautiful – especially when contrasted to the 21st century "zombie" status of social theory (see the scholarly exchange in *The Rise and Fall of Social Theory. The Innsbruck Debate* 2025). Thus, it might be useful to place "systems theory" within its own historical context. The modern conception of "national society" that used to exist in early to mid-20th century was, at that time, a legitimate subject for the inquiries undertaken by Talcott Parsons, Jürgen Habermas and Niklas Luhmann. Starting from the 1970s forward, due to multiple internal and external factors, these (mostly) Western and/or developed "national societies" begun collapsing or imploding.

The disputes between modernists and postmodernists were so ferocious precisely because the implosion of the “social” meant that sociology’s master concept lost its salience in the real world. This realization rendered the objective of a “grand theory” of “society” obsolete. It is indicative of the broader shift that in the 1980s even Jeffrey Alexander abandoned the neo-functionalist designation in favor of the “strong program” of US cultural sociology.

In this book, the author’s prime objective is to project this defunct paradigm into the realm of transnational and global relations, under the guise of a revamped Luhmann-style world society theory. Beck (2000) insinuated a similar theoretical turn more than a quarter century ago. However, over the post-World War II era, real theoretical and empirical innovations occurred in concepts relating to the global or transnational field. As elsewhere suggested (Roudometof 2021), the social sciences developed a new conceptual vocabulary whereby the inter- or cross- or trans-national relations among objects, people, goods and ideas could be (re-)framed. This new vocabulary has reoriented Sociology toward an expanding range of sociological objects (Cooper, King, Rettie 2009) beyond its traditional society- or state-centered focus. To put it plainly: the paradigm shift from “society” to the global and/or the transnational has already taken place.

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