

Political conflict as a solution _____

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Abstract

Albanian politics is customarily characterised as producing tension and conflict to serious degrees. There is also the critique that part of this conflict is entirely artificial (i.e. not occasioned by objective reasons that one can find in the reality of society) and could have, therefore, not been generated at all in the first place. This description of politics certainly has its merits, since it directs our attention to a problem that seems to bring along other problems for the society. However, one can also view the production of tension and conflict as solution to a problem, even though this might only be a political problem. Then, this problem runs the risk of not receiving any attention, for all attention is focused on the solution; it remains latent and, because of this, highly productive in undesirable consequences. Here we will use another viewpoint in order to elucidate the phenomenon of political conflict as well as to provide guidelines for solution.

Key words: *conflict, semantics, Luhmann, power, democracy*

Introduction

The usual way of treating political conflict is by pointing to regional differences, to differences between nation-states, to listing of characteristics presumed to be unique for a certain national society, hoping thereby to gain understanding of it and possibly some indications for reform. This simply divides the world in developed and undeveloped countries and provides for a semantic of development and modernization. On the other hand, it gives occasion to opposing voices that

claim to represent the local truth and the authenticity of local culture (nationalist and terrorist movements for example), while protecting these from attempts at colonization and knowledge produced elsewhere in the so-called developed world. However interesting all this may be, the end result of such procedure is creation of antagonisms that exacerbate tension, indeed transform it into societal conflict (semantically as a conflict between nations, or between cultural groups), which can then no longer be managed at the level of communication, but necessitates the use of destructive technology and violence.

Instead, we start with functional differences. This does not mean disregarding differences between regions, but only repositioning them as not suitable for starting theoretical investigations. The underlying assumption is that regional differences of modern society can be accounted for and their effect can be fully comprehended only by a theory that starts with functional differences. The theory of functional differentiation developed primarily by Niklas Luhmann (Luhmann, 1995, 2012) is better suited for this task.

According to this theory, modern society is differentiated into autonomous function systems such as politics, economy, law, science, art, religion and so on. Modern society is polycentric; it cannot be directed successfully either politically, economically, or scientifically. Politics is just a system among others, with no privileged viewpoint and no superior knowledge of what is best for society. However, in the functionally differentiated modern society, politics realizes a specific function, which cannot be fulfilled by other societal systems: it ensures collectively binding decision-making (Luhmann, 2004: 368). In order to realize this function politics uses its own structures and operations, above all, it uses a specific code for processing information in the form of political communication. Thus, the medium of power, which is used by the political system for establishing itself and continuing its operations, is codified into superior and inferior power, or as it is the case with organized power, into governing and governed. However, modern politics in the form of democracy uses a secondary code, too: that of distinguishing between government and opposition. This can be described as coding of the authority, i.e. as coding of the governing (Luhmann, 1990: 172-176). Without going into more detailed descriptions of the political system of modern society, we assume that problems of high tension and conflict one observes in Albanian politics ought to be interpreted and accounted for as problems of application of the political code.

Exclusion of the public from politics

The primary coding of political power divides the world in two halves: governing and governed. Despite their difference in power (whatever the case, e.g. the

governing may have all the power while the governed none of it, or the governing may simply have more power than the governed), both parties contribute directly and decisively to political operations, i.e. political actions and political processes. This follows from the concept of the code. The code is always a form with two sides, and in order for the code to be operative in the system the connection between the sides must be preserved. In clearer terminology, one side of the code contains the positive (operative) value; it is used as point for connecting the operations recursively. The other side has negative (reflexive) value. But as it makes no sense to speak of positive without negative, likewise, there is no operation without reflexivity. Thus, the reflexive side of the code serves to put limits to the meaning of the operative side: it works to constrain arbitrary use of operations. For the political system this means that the governing (operative side) must take account of the governed (reflexive side) when operating power. To clarify it further we must have a glance at the concept of the system. Unlike the long tradition that begins with Aristotle, systems theory does not presuppose that a system is an entity, a “thing” that contains a certain substance. Rather, the system is a difference with the environment, a difference that is produced by the systems operations, for which there is no counterpart in the environment (Luhmann, 2006). That is, in order to maintain itself as a system, the system must be able to link operations recursively, thereby producing and reproducing its difference from the environment. In other words, a system is a form with two sides: system and environment. It is the unity of the difference between system and environment. But, in order to link operations recursively, the system must be able to observe and describe itself as different from the environment. Therefore the concept of self-observation becomes central to systems theory. With Heinz von Foerster (von Foerster, 1984, 2003) and second-order cybernetics we now speak of observing systems. These are systems that are able to observe other systems in their environment (politics for example can observe economy), but also themselves (politics can observe and describe itself as conservative politics, or progressive politics, or democracy). However, in order to produce self-observation, a system must produce an image of itself as different from what it imagines as “environment”. This calls for application of the mathematical operation that Spencer Brown has named “re-entry” (Spencer Brown, 1972). It means that the form of the system (the distinction system/environment) re-enters itself on one side, the side of the system; as it were, it is copied into it. Thus, the system that is able to observe itself also contains a copy of itself (i.e. an image of itself and an image of its environment). This is how the system produces information that it then uses for performing its operations. As Gregory Bateson put it, information is a difference that makes a difference (Bateson, 1972: 199). Thus, the first system/environment difference that is produced simply by the operations of the system via drawing a clear boundary with everything else that is not a

system operation (the environment) brings about another difference occasioned by self-observation, i.e. an image of the system as different from the image of the environment. However, although it appears that the difference remains the same (it is system/environment in both cases), it is actually a different difference. Using traditional terminology we can say that the first difference produced by the system's operations is objective difference, while the second (re-entered) difference produced by the system's observations is subjective difference. Relevant to our argument about the political system, this means that politics constructs an internal environment (as a consequence of the re-entry operation), which is not the same as the external environment. This internal environment is the public, while the external environment of politics is everything else non-political: economy, law, families, health care, education etc.

However, the political system is an historical system and that means that secondary coding of politics has not always been in use. Indeed, it is an achievement of socio-cultural evolution that corresponds to the functional differentiation of society. Functional differentiation postulates an autonomous political system, which is capable of self-organization and self-observation. To realize these, the system needs secondary coding of power as a means of performing re-entry, i.e. of linking one difference to the other, and thus gaining information about itself and its environment. This is typical of modern politics, for it cannot rely on information and observations produced elsewhere; for example, as shown first by Machiavelli, it cannot accept moral observations as premise for correct political action (Machiavelli, 1984).

Before the historical introduction of secondary coding, politics consisted only in those who govern and those who are governed. It could not, so to speak, perform re-entry. It was unable of self-observation and self-description. Therefore, politics could only be observed and described from outside positions, e.g. morally, religiously, or legally. Nevertheless, both the governing and the governed were within the system and could thus contribute to hold its balance.

This situation changes dramatically with the passage from stratification to functional differentiation. Differentiation of politics as an autonomous function system, which only has itself to rely on for operations, observations and descriptions, necessitated a secondary coding of political power for purposes of reflection (Luhmann, 1990: 176-178). Authority (the governing) is no more the eternal authority justified by divine law and natural law doctrines: it is itself made contingent by providing for political opposition. In the semantic tradition this was celebrated as democracy. Indeed, whatever else a democracy is, as a minimum, it must constitute rules that allow the opposition to compete for power. Alongside these developments was coined the term "public", and the derivatives "public opinion" and "public interest".

But this achievement had also a cost. The secondary codification of power in the political system made room within the system only for government and opposition. No further differences were necessary for directing political operations. That means that the governed, now under the name of “public”, were reduced to a non-position, or in logical terms, to an excluded third. The public became the parasite (Serres, 1982) of the political system, and therefore had to be prevented to ever gaining political power. But politics, apart from processing operations in the medium of power, also needs to prove its worth for and in the society. For this reason, it needs the public as internal environment, as an environment constructed entirely politically and only for political aims (King & Thornhill, 2003: 86-91). Therefore, the once excluded public is now included in the political system, but under conditions that neutralize its potential for getting into power. For instance, the public re-enters the system as capable of providing a mirror for political actors, in the form of “public opinion”, where these actors (both governmental and oppositional) could see their actions reflected and evaluated. Also the public is internalized in the system by using certain procedures as voting, whereby the public is transformed into the electorate, who can decide who will be in the government and who will be in the opposition, but cannot itself claim political power.

In light of the above considerations, *the problem of political tension and conflict that one finds in Albanian politics, ought to be related to the need to first exclude and then include the public in the political system.* However, before going into that discussion, we need to explore another issue, which concerns conceptualization of public experience in the face of political operations. It is important to observe our reference problem from both sides, i.e. from the active perspective of political authority (government/opposition), and from the experiential perspective of the public.

Semantics of political authority

Following Luhmann (Luhmann 1986, 1995, 2012) and Andersen (Andersen, 2003, 2011) we define semantics as condensed meaning that society considers worth preserving for communication in more than one situation and more than once. This definition has important implications. First, it means that semantics serves as a structure for societal operations, i.e. it makes some operations (communications, actions) more probable than others. On the other hand, semantics derive from repeated use of operations and from that follows that they can be changed by them, at least when operations manage to change social structures and expectations attached to them. For example this happens when society changes values, programs, or distribution of roles. Such change of social structure puts pressure

on the semantics to adapt accordingly, lest the society suffers from inadequate self-descriptions. Another point to be emphasized is that semantics, as condensed meaning, is expressed through concepts, ideas, images and symbols (Luhmann 1986, Andersen, 2003). One has therefore the possibility of combining the theoretical work of Luhmann with that of Koselleck by focusing attention to the concept of the concept as a key to studying semantics and its relevance for societal investigations. For both Luhmann and Koselleck (Koselleck, 2004), a concept is a form with two sides: concept and counter-concept. A concept condenses expectations in such a way that many different expectations become condensed into concepts. Concepts are never unambiguously definable. A concept is a kind of expectation structure. To use a particular concept in a communication establishes particular expectations about the continuation of the communication. Moreover, concepts are general in the sense that a concept is not identical with its specific use in a specific communication. The concept is generally available to communication but is given, in the communication, a specific meaning and actualizes specific expectations (Andersen, 2003).

When looking at the secondary code of the political system we can easily notice that we are dealing with a concept, i.e. we have the concept “government” and the counter-concept “opposition”. One of the keys to performing semantic analysis relates to the phenomenon of conceptual shift. Although there are many possibilities for realizing conceptual shift, we shall focus our attention to one of them, namely the case when concept and counter-concept remain the same, but the meaning dimension within which the distinction is defined may have shifted (Andersen 2011). Following systems theory, if we distinguish between a temporal dimension, a social dimension and a factual dimension, one may imagine that the form of the concept changes dimension so that a factual dimension is defined as social or temporal. However, first we need to introduce certain distinctions that distinguish the meaning dimensions.

The factual dimension is about the choice of themes and objects for communication and consciousness. Themes and objects are all structured according to the form of the meaning termed ‘thing’ as the unity of the distinction between this and everything else. The social dimension is based on the non-identity between communication participants and constitutes the horizon of possibility in a tension between ‘alter’ and ‘ego’. Thus, it is about that which is not recognized by me as me. In terms of semantics, it is a question of generalized forms of distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Social identities are the unity of the distinction us/them. Thus the social dimension is the dimension for the semantic construction of social identities, where there can only be an ‘us’ (concept) in relation to a ‘them’ (counter-concept). Finally, the temporal dimension articulates the tension between the past and the future. The temporal dimension is constituted by the fact that the difference between before and after,

which can be immediately experienced in all events, is referred to specific horizons, namely extended into past and future. The semantics of temporality is about the way in which we observe and conceptualize the past and the future. The future is a horizon of expectations and the past a space of experiences, and any present exists only as the tension between the two. What moves in time is past/present/future together, in other words, the present along with its past and future horizons (Andersen 2003).

Now, what conceptual shifts have occurred to the concept government/opposition and what societal problems relate to these shifts? We know that this concept derived from another concept, the one that indicates the primary code of politics: governing/governed. The difference between governing and governed was understood as objective, as essential difference, and therefore it was established in the factual dimension of meaning. That meant that the governed, because of their substantial being, could never be given the chance to govern. It also meant that those in power (the governing), because of their substantial being, could never get out of power. Certainly, this semantic conception corresponded to stratification of society on the basis of rank, and to a morality that since Aristotle divided people into perfect and corrupt beings.

The passage to functional differentiation of society undermined the social support for this semantic conceptualization. Also there were breaches in the field of morality (Nietzsche), where now the road ahead was beyond good and evil, as there were significant changes in the law, which became positive, i.e. changeable. All this was reflected in politics by its secondary coding that defied the unquestionable everlasting of political authority (the monarch, the emperor, aristocracy). Now, those who have been the governed could join the opposition and therefore try their chance to get into power. Having both parties competing for political power, one could no more see the difference between government and opposition as a factual difference. Thus, democracy provided a conceptual shift of the political code away from the factual dimension. The only other options for repositioning this concept remained the temporal and the social dimensions.

Temporality offered some obvious possibilities. It was clear that today's opposition was tomorrow's government and vice versa. This understanding made it possible and, indeed, necessary to focus on certain technical issues. For example, it became indispensable to condition the possibility of rotation. Thus mandates were specified both temporarily and factually and elections were defined as the mechanism for deciding the winner. But besides these technicalities, which provided some structure for the political system, the temporal dimension could not provide an answer to the question of relevance of politics for the society. Actually, this temporal understanding of politics as a simple game of rotation between two players exposed the exclusion of the third player, the public, and risked to turn it into an alienated public. After all, it had to be the latter that would decide the

result of the game, by participating in elections. For this reason, the government/opposition distinction cannot be held solely through temporal means. Therefore, it was worth trying to experiment with the social dimension.

That means that the difference between government and opposition had to be constituted as a difference of observational perspectives. So, government and opposition need to be established as different observers who, although referring to the same object (societal reality), would reach different conclusions about it. But as it is well known, in order to reach a conclusion you first need a premise, and then some reasoning process. To this purpose, one could refer to societal values as a starting point and make them into premises by forming ideas. The next step is both logically compelling and historically verifiable: the organization of ideas into ideologies (Luhmann, 2008). Ideologies have the advantage of relating conjunctively several premises with one another and also any of the premises to the conclusion via a deductive operation. Therefore, the difference of conclusions depended above all on the selection of values one started off with. It is interesting to notice that, although there is societal consensus at the level of values, one cannot claim societal consensus at the level of ideologies. Thus ideologies serve to transform unity into difference and to produce from a single observing position (society) a plurality of observing positions (the different ideologies). However, these ideological positions can only be used by systems, as Heinz von Foerster reminds us. In a democracy, this means that observers have to be politically organized systems, i.e. political parties. Therefore the social difference between 'us' and 'them' emerges as a difference of party ideology. Of course, one can form numerous ideologies quite easily, but in order to provide points of orientation in the political system, they are usually aggregated and reduced to left and right, or progressive and conservative ideologies (Luhmann, 1990). At the level of political parties, this reduction plays an important function: that of conditioning coalition formation on the basis of common values and similar ideologies. This paves the way for creation of concepts like "integrity" and "responsibility", which condense expectations about the relation of political parties to a certain ideological position, as well as their relation to the public. However, in order to become credible, party ideology needs to be supplemented by an instrument that provides the means for its realization, i.e. a programme. This means that the difference between 'us' and 'them' must also be articulated programmatically. Party programmes tell the public how 'we' are going to do this in difference to how 'they' would do it. But since a programme is made in the present and refers to the future (which may prove it right or wrong, because no one knows the future for certain), the public usually experiences it as uncertainty and possible cost, rather than as difference between government and opposition. Therefore, the different observers (and their observations) established by the

semantics of sociality are undermined by the temporal dimension of meaning and replaced by a single imaginary observer: the future.

For democratic politics this leaves two options: either making a claim for the future, or objectifying the present. It is here, in the decision to opt for one of the options over the other that the cultural and historical (i.e. regional) differences make a difference. The argument goes that culture and history indeed do play a significant role by providing structure to this decision situation.

Albanian democracy revisited

The discussion on Albanian democracy ought to focus on the two points identified as crucial by the conceptual analysis: 1. The exclusion/inclusion mechanism of the Albanian public in the political system; 2. The decision between claiming the future and objectifying the present. Therefore, on the level of description and relevant to first point, one may raise the following questions: What is peculiar about the Albanian political system's mechanism of exclusion/inclusion? Is the exclusion smooth or noisy? What about the inclusion? Which criteria are used for excluding/including the public in politics? Could it be that some of those who pretend to be excluded are in fact included, and vice versa? On the level of explanation one may ask: What cultural and historical features condition the peculiarities of this mechanism of exclusion/inclusion in politics? Are these features not present in the culture and history of other countries? How does the culturally and historically established Albanian mass media system contribute to forming and/or reinforcing the illusion of inclusion/exclusion? How do the political parties contribute to this?

Regarding the second point, on the descriptive level one may ask: Is Albanian politics demonstrating a preference for claiming knowledge of the future, or is it attempting to objectify the present? Is the present high tension and artificial conflict a symptom of the former or the latter? Could it be that we are witnessing a combination of both options, in a kind of transitional move from the one to the other? If so, from which to which? On the explanation level, accordingly: How do Albania's cultural and historical features constrain the choice of one of the options over the other? How strong is the influence of culture and history in this decision? Could the Albanian political system operate without breaking itself via using the other option?

These are questions that have been merely posed in this article, they all point to the problem of reality of political artificiality, but in order to answer them much empirical work is necessary. However, the aim of this article was to contribute in changing the perspective of studying this problem, thereby, making a programmatic stance for future research.

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