


Jakub Ryszard Stempień*

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9526-4823>

SIX THEOREMS OF THE SOCIAL DISINTEGRATION THEORY

Abstract. In the article the author's own theoretical view, intended to describe the specificity and condition of contemporary society, is presented. The approach discussed in the paper refers to the functionalist tradition in sociology, emphasizing the systemic nature of such social entities as society. At the same time, the conventional premise of functionalism regarding the cohesive nature of social systems is rejected here. Accordingly, the theoretical approach proposed is called social disintegration theory. Six theorems of this theory are introduced and discussed in the paper.

Keywords: social system, society, social evolution, globalization, social disintegration theory.

SZEŚĆ TWIERDZEŃ TEORII DEZINTEGRACJI SPOŁECZNEJ

Abstrakt. Artykuł prezentuje własną propozycję teoretyczną autora, stanowiącą próbę opisu specyfiki i kondycji współczesnego społeczeństwa. Prezentowane w pracy podejście nawiązuje do tradycji myśli funkcjonalnej w socjologii, akcentując systemiczny charakter takich całości społecznych, jak społeczeństwo. Zarazem konwencjonalna przesłanka funkcjonalizmu dotycząca zbornego charakteru systemów społecznych jest tu odrzucana. W związku z tym, proponowane podejście teoretyczne jest tu nazywane teorią dezintegracji społecznej. W artykule wprowadzonych i omówionych zostało sześć twierdzeń tej teorii.

Słowa kluczowe: system społeczny, społeczeństwo, ewolucja społeczna, globalizacja, teoria dezintegracji społecznej.

* PhD, The Department of Rural and Urban Sociology, Institute of Sociology, Faculty of Economics and Sociology, University of Lodz, ul. Rewolucji 1905 r. 41/43, 90-214 Łódź, e-mail: j.r.stempien@wp.pl

1. Introduction

In 1992, under the auspices of the Union of Concerned Scientists, the “World Scientists’ Warning to Humanity” was published, signed by more than 1,700 researchers, including the majority of living Nobel Prize laureates in the sciences. The document stresses that human activities are conflicting with the demands of the environment, which is rapidly degrading, and must eventually lead to the collapse of humanity itself. It pointed out the need for changes in the way the Earth and life on it are managed. The following threat factors were listed: depletion of the ozone layer, declining availability of fresh water, depletion of marine life, dead zones of the oceans, decline of forest cover, destruction of biodiversity, climate change and continued growth of the human population (Ripple et al. 2017). After 25 years, a second version of the warning was presented, which was signed by 15364 scientists from around the world. They stated that in a quarter of a century, humanity has achieved virtually no achievements in improving the mentioned indicators. Conversely, data on – on a global scale – CO₂ emissions, freshwater resources, forest area, vertebrate species richness, etc., showed a continued rate of regression (Ripple et al. 2017).

This leads to the question of why there has been essentially no improvement, and whether it can be assumed that the appeals of scientists have simply been ignored? To answer the latter doubt, someone might deny it and recall the European Green Deal, an action plan designed to allow Europe to become a climate-neutral continent by 2050. As part of the Deal, the European Parliament recently passed a European Climate Law raising the target for reducing greenhouse gas emissions to at least 55% by 2030 (from the previously planned 40%). In the face of these steps, however, one can raise the objection that the planned efforts are nevertheless too slow and affect only a small percentage of the global population. They are therefore inadequate in the face of the threat, while appropriate global action is lacking.

Ewa Bińczyk (2013: 57–63) indicates the successes of the propaganda of denial and ordered production of doubt and ignorance about climate warming. This refers to the activities of experts, think tanks, scientific institutes, consulting companies and public relations agencies, which professionally engage in maintaining public belief in the harmlessness of selected products or solutions (so-called product defense industry). In this case, it would be about denying the fact of climate change and the threat of environmental catastrophe. But were the warnings of scientists indeed ignored, as the public and policymakers gave credence to cynical denialists?

A valid option to consider is that the changes advocated by the scientists (which include eliminating fossil fuels and fully shifting to renewable energy sources, switching to mainly plant-based diets, abandoning the idea of unlimited economic growth and unlimited consumption in favor of a green economy, and gradually reducing the world’s population through educational efforts and promoting unsolicited family planning) (Ripple et al. 2021) were too radical to be realistic to implement.

Such a high level of coordination and causation would have been needed here, and fundamental change would have been required in so many different spheres of human life (which at the same time would have compromised the interests of so many groups), that working out any effects was unlikely, despite the dramatic nature of the subsequent warnings. The work presented here, however, is not about environmental threats, but aims at a more general social reflection. The issue of possible environmental catastrophe is only a case in point.

Geoffrey Godbey, examining the specificity and condition of post-industrial society, states (1990: 33): “Our society is characterized by new costs of coordination. As society becomes more complex, as we become more interdependent, and as our ability to harm each other increases, planning and regulating our society becomes more important and more difficult”. However, as Paweł Starosta (2005: 123) notes, “globalization also brings with it a process of deinstitutionalization, expressed mainly in the diminishing role of the nation-state, the family, bureaucratically organized labor structures, and social service institutions (...) Deinstitutionalization does not mean the disappearance of formal bureaucratic and hierarchical structures, established during industrialization and forming the basis of public life, nor of institutions based on tradition. Rather, the process is characterized by the gradual reduction of their leading role in meeting needs and exercising real power over social behavior, and the increasing participation of impermanent rules and norms in regulating human actions” [own translation]. Thus, on the one hand, we are dealing with an increasing demand for control and coordination of activities in an increasingly complex (and globalizing) world, while on the other hand, we could speak of a weakening of the structures previously in charge of carrying out this task.

Anthony Giddens (2006: 96–97) has articulated the conviction that humanity is facing the need for a global governance system to meet the risks and challenges of globalization. This would be the most reasonable option considering the scale of global interdependence and the rapid pace of change we are not only witnessing, but also experiencing. Giddens pointed to the European Union and the United Nations as encouraging examples. At the same time, he stated that new forms of international governance could usher in a new, more righteous and secure cosmopolitan order. He concluded his remarks by asserting that subordinating the social world to our will is not beyond our capabilities. On the contrary, it should be a task that in the 21st century becomes the supreme necessity and the greatest challenge facing societies (Giddens 2006: 97). The work presented here is based on fundamental doubts under such optimism. I would like to present my own theoretical view later in the text. First, however, some terminological settlements must be made.

2. Terminological settlements

In this study, I would like to refer to the functionalist tradition in sociology in a critical and non-committal way. The key terms will therefore be: social system, subsystem, society and global society.

So I assume – following George Ritzer (2011: 479) – that the category of “system” is best and most accurately applied simply to society as a whole (although it can also be used to describe other communities as well). Ritzer also cites Bernard Barber, who goes even further and argues that the idea of a social system should even be limited to collectivities such as societies. According to the dictionary definition, a “society is a group of people, who share a common culture, occupy a particular territorial area, and feel themselves to constitute a unified and distinct entity” (Marshall 1996: 498). Talcott Parsons, identifying the social system as the object of his interest, cited such characteristics of the system as self-sufficiency, biological reproduction and socialization of new generations. As he proposed, “a social system of this type, which meets all the essential function prerequisites of long term persistence from within its own resources, will be called society” (Parsons 1952: 19). So when “society” is referred to in the text, it will refer to a social system, primarily national societies with a state organization.

Global society, on the other hand, is a product of globalization, i.e. a process in which “social relations acquire relatively distanceless and borderless qualities, so that human lives are increasingly played out in the world as a single place” (Scholte 1999: 14 after Al-Rodhan, Stoudmann 2006: 13). At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that globalization “encompasses the causes, course, and consequences of transnational and transcultural integration of human and non-human activities” (Al-Rodhan, Stoudmann 2006: 5). A global society would thus be characterized by all the features of society in general, but on the scale of the entire earthly universe.

I assume that subsystems are distinguishable “sections” of society, its components, themselves being certain entities. These entities are recognized, as distinguishable, by the social actors who take systematic or incidental actions within them. This recognition is fostered not only by the nomenclature peculiar to each subsystem, but above all by the particularity of the “rules of the game” and the criteria and conditions for effective action within them. The very possibility of action within the subsystems can be rationed, and therefore limited to individuals or groups that meet certain criteria. Thus, we can distinguish, for example, the education subsystem, the economic subsystem, the cultural subsystem, the information (media) subsystem, the medical subsystem, the military subsystem, the physical culture subsystem, the subsystem of political organization of society, etc.

Parsons himself distinguished four chief subsystems: economic, political, social and cultural subsystems, which were supposed to correspond to the requirements of the whole system, referred to by the acronym AGIL: Adaptation, Goal attainment,

Integration and Latent pattern maintenance (Parsons 1971; Ritzer 2011: 479–480). On the other hand, however, Parsons was inclined to recognize that the centuries-old process of social evolution, bringing with it an increase in the complexity of the social organism, implies at the same time a multiplication of social subsystems (Ritzer 2011: 483–484; see also Sztompka 2005: 122–124). Thus, it seems that he, too, would be willing to relate the category of subsystem not only to the aforementioned fixed four elements, but also to accept the solution proposed here, according to which within these subsystems the constituent elements can be separated.

3. Six theorems of the social disintegration theory

With the above dictionary at my disposal, I would like to present a certain theoretical approach – let's call it the theory of social disintegration – that describes the constitution of contemporary society. This approach consists of the following six theorems, which I will try to clarify and justify later in the study.

1. **The autonomy theorem.** Contemporary societies are characterized by a significant degree of autonomy of the components, the performance of which remains the result of internal logic and dynamics rather than being the result of the requirements of the whole system.
2. **The historicity theorem.** The low level of integration of subsystems with the requirements of the entire social system is not an persistent feature of social life, but rather remains an effect of social evolution.
3. **The non-factual subordination theorem.** The subsystems remain formally subordinated to central control, and the façade statement that their action should be in harmony with the requirements of the social whole or simply serve important social goals is not seriously challenged.
4. **The rationality theorem.** Rational actors (individual or collective) within a subsystem are oriented toward maximizing their own benefits (material and immaterial gains, securing positions, etc.) and leveling risks and reducing inputs (time, energy, etc.). In doing so, they are either free (subject only to the most general social norms), or their actions are subordinated to actors higher up in the hierarchy, to whom they must give an account of their undertakings. In this case, their actions are organized in accordance with the rigor of accountability, but control is generally inept.
5. **The linkage theorem.** The operations of particular subsystems affect the performance of the other components of the social system. Thus, no subsystem exists in a social vacuum, but on the contrary, its condition remains the result of certain social circumstances, and the actions of the actors involved in this field affect other subsystems and the social whole.
6. **The uncontrollability theorem.** In view of the expanding autonomy of subsystems, and as a result of the progressive social evolution meaning the

complexity of the system increases, the system actually loses its ability to operate effectively and achieve its goals. Progressive disintegration means that goals that were once viable are now located out of reach.

Let's take a closer look at these six theorems. The autonomy theorem stands in obvious opposition to the functionalist tradition, which assumes the existence of social *order*. It should be noted that the mechanism of working out market equilibrium has been described in liberal economics with reference to the metaphor of the "invisible hand". In the case of sociological analyses from the field of functionalism, such arrangements are absent. Recall that the classics of functionalism, such as Émile Durkheim and Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, even warned against the trap of teleologism in functional analysis, that is, explaining the function of specific elements through the purposes they are supposed to serve for the benefit of the social whole (Turner, Maryanski 1979: 17–18, 40–44). As Jonathan H. Turner points out, such a way of thinking is not necessarily invalid, but it would be necessary to demonstrate how the social system was programmed, engineered (Turner 2004: 14–15).

However, the autonomy theorem is not just a denial of the functionalist belief in a self-creating and reproducing social order. It also goes beyond the criticism of functionalism from conflict theory, represented, for example, by Ralf Dahrendorf, who advocated focusing analytical attention around concepts such as conflict or change, treating Parsons' model of an integrated and static society as inadequate. The theorem, then, is not about the fact that life in contemporary societies is full of tension, injustice or competition for limited resources. It goes more to emphasize that the operation of various social subsystems is not as integrated as the functionalists assumed. The subsystems are characterized by a considerable degree of freedom, "living their own lives", which with the needs of the whole system may not necessarily have much in common. This does not mean that they are isolated from each other (see the linkage theorem).

This theorem may bring to mind the diagnosis of Daniel Bell, who proclaimed the autonomy of the techno-economic, polity and cultural structures of modern societies. These structures are supposed to be determined by various regulative modes that organize action; thus, rigor of economizing, idea of equality and desire for self-expression, respectively (Bell 1978: 10–13). In Bell's view, contradictions arise between these structures, which creates tensions and conflicts. The autonomy theorem is less radical: it tells not so much about antinomies as about lack of coordination.

Let's point out that the autonomy theorem seems to completely bypass the trap of teleologism. While order requires an explanation (in simple terms, it is a matter of answering the question: *who cleaned up?*), disorder can be considered an understandable result of uncoupled forces.

The historicity theorem, on the other hand, tells us that this lack of social cohesiveness characterizes developed and evolutionarily advanced societies rather than societies in general. In fact, this thesis is not new. It has already been reported by

social neo-evolutionists such as Leslie White, who describes culture as an adaptive mechanism by which the human species adapts to natural environment, mainly by harnessing natural sources of energy and using them to satisfy human needs (Sztompka 2005: 117). Thus, culture has a biological basis, but once it arises, it gains a certain autonomy; it has its own life, momentum and evolves according to its own mechanisms and regularities (Sztompka 2005: 117). It should be emphasized that, according to White, the later dynamics of culture can no longer be interpreted as a response to external challenges. The key to the evolution of culture can be found in culture itself (Sztompka 2005: 117). Thus, culture in a historical perspective emancipates itself, i.e. loses its close connection to the requirements of the social whole. A similar idea is contained in Anthony Smith's commentary made at the address of Julian Steward's neo-evolutionary considerations (Sztompka 2005: 117–119). Smith argues that the natural environment and techno-economic factors (so, for example, the level of development of technology) determine culture especially in the early stages of evolution (a high level of system congruence is maintained at that time), while a much greater share of determining factors of a political or ideological nature is allowed in later stages. The form of government, religion or art can acquire a more autonomous figure (Sztompka 2005: 119). The autonomy of subsystems (and consequently, the incongruity of the whole) would thus be a product of history.

The historicity theorem would accept some neo-evolutionary theses, such as Parsons' view that socio-cultural evolution means differentiation from simple to progressively more complex forms. This means advancing specialization, an increasingly sophisticated division of labor and a multiplication of social subsystems. However, it is doubtful that the original level of social congruence will be maintained. Even if the rationale for the emergence of new subsystems (on the basis of the division of subsystems already in place) is their higher specialization, and thus more efficient operation and better response to changing circumstances (as Parsons argues), it seems possible that the level of harmonization of the new subsystem with the requirements of the whole (which Parsons analyzes by describing the mechanism of inclusion) may vary and change over time. It is possible that, over time, the new subsystem begins to be characterized by a peculiarity of interests and an orientation toward autonomy.

The historicity theorem would explain that functionalistically oriented cultural anthropologists like Bronisław Malinowski were not under illusion. The communities they investigated could indeed be cohesive entities. However, the level of integration of the social system is reduced in the course of social evolution. Globalization would represent the next stage here: a shift from differentiation within social systems (as Parsons wrote about) to the merging of increasingly complex and intricate social wholes to produce a new quality (i.e., global society) characterized by structural complexity on an unprecedented scale.

On the other hand, the non-factual subordination theorem informs us that social subsystems within the traditionally understood social system (such as the

medical subsystem, the educational subsystem or the narrowly defined cultural subsystem) remain under the control of other specialized subsystems, including, in particular, the supervision of the political subsystem, which should, it is assumed, ensure their functionality. The non-factual subordination theorem, however, tells us that this vassalage does not violate the actual autonomy of the subsystems. Indeed, the control exercised over their functioning is not effective. It is worth recalling here Jan Lutyński's concept of apparent activities, which are defined as undertakings officially considered important for the realization of some socially important goal, but which in fact do not fulfill this goal and actors implementing these actions are aware – but publicly not externalizing it – of this. Thus, a sufficient rationale for the existence of apparent activities is the mere attribution to them of a role in achieving a given goal. Their real function, therefore, always lies in their existence, although this existence may be in a residual form, merely formal (Lutyński 1990: 107). Lutyński distinguished four mechanisms that cause apparent activities: the organizational and decision-making mechanism, the axiological mechanism, the mechanism of compulsory implementation of fanciful decrees, and the supposedly pragmatic mechanism (Lutyński 1990: 108–114). It should be strongly emphasized that although Lutyński's inspiration for formulating the concept of apparent activities came from observations of the system of real socialism, the author himself was strongly convinced that apparent activities and the mechanisms causing them are temporally and spatially unlimited, even if their intensity may depend on the era or country under consideration (Lutyński 1990: 108). Lutyński's concept shows how controls and orders – that within a given subsystem, may be considered fanciful or (more importantly from the point of view of the considerations carried out here) detrimental to the interests of the group – can be evaded.

This is because the rationality theorem, based on the premises of rational choice theory, tells us that actors – both individual and collective – operating within a given subsystem are guided primarily by profit and loss calculations. The perspective of the well-being of the social whole is not very much interesting to them. It seems more important and realistic to estimate whether the action taken will bring certain profits (e.g. in terms of power, money, prestige) or whether, for example, it will mean a threat to the position already achieved, and with what costs (in terms of effort, finances) it will be associated. It is the reckoning of self-interest that will determine the course of action. Thus, if insistence from the controlling subsystem is perceived as threatening interests, the result will be actions of an apparent nature in Lutyński's sense.

This can be fostered by group loyalty (identities within the subsystem) and specific group socialization (involving action patterns, ethos, etc.). The so-called "besieged fortress syndrome" will serve perfectly here; the perception of one's own group as threatened by external, hostile powers not only consolidates it, but can also promote the justification, "whitewashing" of various non-normative actions undertaken by its members.

I would like to emphasize that the orientation to own interests will also apply to the managers of the system (if the representatives of the political subsystem could be considered as such). They will construct their own actions and the actions of subordinate structures in such a way as to bring them maximum profits and secure their positions. Even if the needs (and therefore functional requirements) of the entire system (with its complex structure) were recognizable to them, it is clear that they do not need to organize their undertakings.

The fifth theorem is the linkage theorem. This is a well-known claim, derived directly from the functionalist tradition. According to it, there is a network of interrelationships between the various subsystems. The functioning of these subsystems affects other components of the social whole.

Functionalists generally assumed that the operation of subsystems is somehow in harmony with each other (although the problem here is the teleological trap mentioned above). The one who was perhaps most concerned with the problematic nature of this issue was Robert K. Merton. Commenting on his proposed algorithm (the so-called paradigm) for functional analysis in sociology, he stressed that one misunderstanding of the concept of function is the tendency to limit sociological observations to the positive contribution made by a phenomenon to the cultural or social system. Meanwhile, the observed consequences can be, Merton pointed out, either positive (functional), negative (dysfunctional and therefore lessening adaptation or adjustment of the system) or neutral (non-functional) (Merton 1968: 105). Thus, he explicitly rejected the conventional postulate of universal functionalism, according to which all solid and sustained social and cultural forms have positive functions.

The functionalist tradition explains that the various components of a social system have certain relationships with each other (they are interrelated, i.e. interdependent), and their action is integrated (they are harmonized). In this study, I argue for accepting the first premise while rejecting the other one.

4. Final remarks

In conclusion, I assume that the various social subsystems are characterized today by a significant degree of autonomy. Their performance is therefore non-integrated, which does not mean isolated. On the contrary, the subsystems influence each other (if only by acquiring resources to the detriment of other subsystems and limiting the spectrum of their activities). Actors involved in the subsystems make rational choices and calculate the costs and profits of their actions in the short and long term. Their actions, rational and egoistic, are unrelated to the requirements of the social whole. The structure of the system itself continues to become more complex (as a result of social evolution), which is further compounded by integration with other systems (globalization).

It seems that Parsons's optimism, according to which, in the course of social evolution, the multiplication of subsystems (division, specialization) should raise the level of readiness of the system for ever new adaptive challenges, may have been undue. It is worth considering whether it is not the case that a highly complex system, which includes actually autonomous (though not isolated) elements, is not at the same time a system that loses controllability. This would be a system facing fundamental difficulties in formulating commonly accepted goals and achieving them by enforcing appropriate actions on the part of the components. This is stated in the last theorem, the uncontrollability theorem.

Perhaps as a certain test (in Popperian mode) for the theoretical view reported here we can consider facing the adaptive challenge in the form of the threat of environmental catastrophe. Will social systems (integrating in the course of globalization into a kind of super-system) be able to meet this challenge by planning and enforcing changes in the functioning of the economy, the family, lifestyles and consumption? I wish that my diagnosis of the ineptitude, incongruity and inefficiency of social systems would prove fundamentally inadequate.

Acknowledgements

I would like to sincerely thank the first readers of the manuscript, Professors Paweł Starosta and Kazimierz Kowalewicz, and PhDs Łukasz Kutyló and Rafał Mielczarek, for their insightful comments, but also for their kind reception of the paper, which encouraged me to continue working on it. I would also like to thank Professor Grażyna Romańczuk-Woronecka, whose remarks on my lecture presented at the XVIII Polish Sociological Congress led me to fundamentally restructure the story.

References

- Al-Rodhan N.R., Stoudmann G. (2006), *Definitions of globalization: A comprehensive overview and a proposed definition* – report developed under “Program on the geopolitical implications of globalization and transnational security”, accessible at <https://www.studocu.com/en-gb/document/university-of-dundee/international-relations/definitions-of-globalization-a-comprehensive-overview-and-a-proposed-definition/1566906> (accessed: 29.08.2023).
- Bell D. (1978), *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, Basic Books, Inc. Publishers, New York.
- Bińczyk E. (2013), *Problem sceptycyzmu wobec zmiany klimatycznej a postkonstrukttywizm*, “Przegląd Kulturoznawczy”, vol. 15, no. 1.
- Giddens A. (2006), *Socjologia*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa.
- Godbey G. (1990), *Leisure in Your Live. An Exploration*, Venture Publishing, State College, Pennsylvania.
- Lutyński J. (1990), *Nauka i polskie problemy. Komentarz socjologa*, PIW, Warszawa.

- Marshall G. (ed.) (1996), *Concise Dictionary of Sociology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford–New York.
- Merton R.K. (1968), *Social Theory and Social Structure*, Free Press, New York.
- Parsons T. (1952), *The Social System*, Free Press, Glencoe, Illinois.
- Parsons T. (1971), *The System of Modern Societies*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New York.
- Ripple W.J., Wolf Ch., Newsome T.M., Galetti M., Alamgir M., Crist E., Mahmoud M.I., Laurance W.F. (2017), *World Scientists' Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice*, "BioScience", vol. 67, no. 12. <https://doi.org/10.1093/biosci/bix125>
- Ripple W.J., Wolf Ch., Newsome T.M., Gregg J.W., Lenton T.M., Palomo I., Eikelboom J.A.J., Law B.E., Huq S., Duffy F.B., Rockström J. (2021), *World Scientists' Warning of a Climate Emergency 2021*, "BioScience", vol. 71, no. 9. <https://doi.org/10.1093/biosci/biab079>
- Ritzer G. (2011), *Classical Sociological Theory*, McGraw-Hill Companies, New York.
- Scholte J.A. (1999), *The Globalization of World Politics* [in:] J. Baylis, S. Smith (eds.), *The Globalization of World Politics, An Introduction to International Relations*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Starosta P. (2005), *Więź społeczna w dobie globalizacji*, "Annales. Etyka w życiu gospodarczym", vol. 8, no. 1.
- Sztompka P. (2005), *Socjologia zmian społecznych*, Znak, Kraków.
- Turner J.H. (2004), *Struktura teorii socjologicznej*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa.
- Turner J.H., Maryanski A. (1979), *Functionalism*, Benjamin/Cummings Publishing Company, Menlo Park, California.