

PROTEST SYSTEMS: OUTLINE OF A SYSTEMS MODEL OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Abstract

This article examines and reconstructs Niklas Luhmann's systems theory approach to social movements. It begins by describing the evolution and core characteristics of protest movements within Luhmann's framework, identifying their key performances as social immune systems that highlight the unresolved contradictions of functional differentiation. However, the author critiques Luhmann's model for being overly general, synchronist, politico-centric, and disconnected from empirical research, noting its limitations in accounting for complex internal structures or movements outside highly industrialized regions. To overcome these deficiencies, the article outlines a refined "protest systems" model that integrates three complementary analytical levels: 1) Micro level: Explores everyday interactions, personal meaning-making, shared cultures, and individual identification processes. 2) Meso level: Analyzes the internal organizational aspects, including leadership roles, decision-making mechanisms, and the production and distribution of collective resources. 3) Macro level: Examines alliances, conflicts, public staging, and the structural relationships between the protest system, global society, and other function systems (such as law, science, and the media). Ultimately, this multidimensional and multi-causal framework frees the study of collective action from political reductionism and teleological assumptions, offering a robust, empirically applicable tool for sociological research.

Keywords

Systems Theory; Niklas Luhmann; social movements; protest systems; empirical research.

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SISTEMAS DE PROTESTO: ESBOÇO DE UM MODELO SISTÊMICO DOS MOVIMENTOS SOCIAIS

Resumo

Este artigo examina e reconstrói a abordagem da teoria dos sistemas de Niklas Luhmann em relação aos movimentos sociais. Ele começa descrevendo a evolução e as características centrais dos movimentos de protesto dentro do quadro conceitual de Luhmann, identificando suas principais funções como sistemas imunológicos sociais que destacam as contradições não resolvidas da diferenciação funcional. No entanto, o autor critica o modelo de Luhmann por ser excessivamente geral, sincronista, politocêntrico e desconectado da pesquisa empírica, apontando suas limitações em explicar estruturas internas complexas ou movimentos fora de regiões altamente industrializadas. Para superar essas deficiências, o artigo delineia um modelo refinado de “sistemas de protesto” que integra três níveis analíticos complementares: 1) Nível micro: explora as interações cotidianas, a construção de significado pessoal, as culturas compartilhadas e os processos de identificação individual. 2) Nível meso: analisa os aspectos organizacionais internos, incluindo papéis de liderança, mecanismos de tomada de decisão e a produção e distribuição de recursos coletivos. 3) Nível macro: examina alianças, conflitos, encenação pública e as relações estruturais entre o sistema de protesto, a sociedade global e outros sistemas funcionais (como o direito, a ciência e a mídia). Em última análise, esse quadro multidimensional e multicausal liberta o estudo da ação coletiva do reducionismo político e das suposições teleológicas, oferecendo uma ferramenta robusta e empiricamente aplicável para a pesquisa sociológica.

Palavras-chave

Teoria dos Sistemas; Niklas Luhmann; movimentos sociais; sistemas de protesto; pesquisa empírica.

1 INTRODUCTION

The question of social movements engaged the attention of Niklas Luhmann at different points in his career, especially in the last 13 years of his enormous intellectual production. The concept is briefly mentioned only a couple of times in *Soziale Systeme* (Luhmann, 1984, p. 541-550), but he would discuss it more fully a few years later in *Ökologische Kommunikation* (Luhmann, 1988, p. 227) and would provide a more decisive treatment in *Soziologie des Risikos* (Luhmann, 1991, p. 135-154)¹. With the appearance in Italian of *Teoria della società* (1992, p. 335-339)², the concept would acquire its own place in the general architecture of his theory, and would be confirmed with the publication of *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (Luhmann, 1997, p. 847-865). *Protest* (1996) is a collection of articles and interviews in which the subject is specifically addressed. And a final approach to "protest movements," at least for the moment, can be found in the posthumous *Die Politik der Gesellschaft* (Luhmann, 2000, p. 274-318).

In all these works, the principal empirical referents the author has in mind are the feminist, environmentalist, pacifist, and anti-immigrant movements in the old Federal Republic of Germany. This context explains why terms like "risk," "fear," and "morals" acquire great importance in his thinking and seem appropriate to a highly-individualized society, with post-traditional ways of life, in whose middle strata – to use a term inappropriate to this theory – movements find followers and sympathizers.

In this chapter, I will discuss the conception of the protest movement in Luhmann's work. I will begin with a description of its most distinctive characteristics, followed by an examination of its problems and limitations. Next, I will outline a model of protest systems that is theoretically and methodologically useful for empirical research, without forsaking

¹ Citations here are to the English translation (1993a).

² Citation to the Spanish translation (1993b).

the goal of the systems theory of power to apply to any social object. I will conclude by describing the benefits of a systemic turn in the study of social movements.

2 NIKLAS LUHMANN'S CONCEPT OF THE PROTEST MOVEMENT

Modern society can be seen as a "risk society" (Luhmann, 1993a)³. The dynamic of the operative closure and the autopoiesis of function systems permanently creates situations that can be described as risky or dangerous, depending on the point of view. In general, being affected by the problems deriving of social differentiation are not related to social category, group, status, or a particular lifestyle. This condition is, sociologically speaking, "imprecise": anyone can be affected, and no special previous social link is implied among those exposed to danger or those who experience externally-generated damage. In general, reactions to danger thus reflect individual behaviors and strategies. However, individual courses of action are not the only ones possible; a danger can also be confronted in a collectively-organized way. Here is where, in principle, the conditions for autocatalysis of a protest movement can be generated.

Protest is a dual form: on the one hand, we find those who are protesting, and on the other, what they are protesting against. Through the protest communication, the existence of interested parties and those affected by dangers caused by third parties also becomes evident, and these can, at a given moment, support the mobilization. "We know that protest movements serve to mobilize resources and stabilize new links. Only when such mobilization aims at objectives can we speak of an autopoietic system" (Luhmann, 1998, p. 854). Protest is precisely the "catalytic moment" of a movement. The issue is the "condition for its reproduction" (Luhmann, 1998, p. 860). "Issues are to the form of protest what programs

³ An extensive discussion of the subject can be found in Estrada Saavedra (2012).

are to a code. They make it clear why we find ourselves on one side of the form, as the ones who are protesting" (Luhmann, 1998, p. 857).

Protest can be understood, then, as the specific means of resolving the double contingency, as it organizes and links the internal communication of the movement around the issue in question, at the same time allowing the formation of structures of expectations, identities (us/them), perspectives of observation (safe/unsafe, war/peace, citizen/foreigner, etc.), recognition of intrinsic and extrinsic activities, and all the internal complexity of the system. "'Autopoietic' also means that the formation and structuring of the system is not the effect of external factors. Protest is not content that it is imported into the system from the environment; it is a construct of the system itself, the grounds for which are then assigned to the environment. This does not mean that the protest cannot have comprehensible grounds, and in particular grounds comprehensible to the individual. The movement is far from living only by self-deception. The system, to vary a well-known formula, is open with regard to topic and occasion, but closed in relation to the form of protest. It recognizes itself in the process by which all facts accessible to it are pressed into the form of protest and reproduced with the aid of this form. In this way it combines in every operation external reference and self-reference, i.e., external occasions for an internally updated protest (Luhmann, 1993a, p. 127).

Of course, not every regret, rejection, or discontent, not every denial, disapproval, or complaint is automatically a protest issue. To be such, it is necessary to be part of the autopoietic, communicative flow of a movement, to be capable of defining its boundaries with its environment and distinguishing which communications belong on one or the other side of the system/environment distinction. It is only with the identification of certain communication as protest that the movement can choose to adopt it in accordance with its structure of expectations (Luhmann, 1996, p. 176). In addition, although the subject of the protest enables the operative closure of the movement for its autopoiesis, and is indeed a

fundamental element, it is not sufficient to characterize the movement. "[Only] when the protest acquires a thematic form... can it be assumed that *commitments* are also generated in the movement, commitments to participate and mobilize that transcend what one expresses, from time to time, as frustration or discontent" (Luhmann, 1996, p. 178).

Movements have a greater chance of maintaining themselves over time if they successfully link protest and an issue. For this reason, certain issues can generate greater opportunities than others for recruiting new followers and sympathizers. Over the long run, the selection and cultivation of an issue leads to the formation of a particular "semantics of protest" that configures the "reality" of the movement in meaningful ways, "cultivating and attempting to impose deviant linguistic usage – as in the neomature semantics of the ecological movement. Thus the gap between the linguistic usage of function systems and the more close-to-home semantics of the protest movement becomes so wide that communication has to be guided by subjects at more concrete levels. This renders protest movements all the more dependent on topics of their own choice. But topics have a dynamic of their own, which does not necessarily fulfil this condition (Luhmann, 1993a, p. 127).

The gambit of protest movements consists, then, in making structural connections to influence the mass media and bring their issues to public attention. Their success depends on their capacity to maintain visibility in the media. To this end, they attempt all manner of strategies of appearance, staging, and public mobilization (in media terms, "pseudo events" (Luhmann, 1998, p. 862) and thus assure their presence and that of their issue in newspapers, television and radio news, and now on the internet. In this way, they seek to maneuver issues from their position on the periphery into the center of the political system, with the hope of making them the concern of leaders and legislators, and in the best of cases of making them into public policy – independent of how politically realistic it is to expect the government to do so (Luhmann, 2000, p. 16).

The style of protest is, moreover, not "cognitive," but "reactive" (Luhmann, 1998, p. 853). In effect, it is satisfied with presenting the problem in a very schematic way in order to emotionally position movement followers and sympathizers, and the public at large. The goal is to facilitate a reaction appealing to the fear of possible negative effects of social differentiation and the moral indignation of the "just" against the "unjust".

Until the publication of *Teoria della società* (1992) and *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (1997), Luhmann considered the existence of only three autonomous, fundamental types of social systems: the interaction, the organization, and society (Luhmann, 2005 [1975]). However, with the subsequent development of his thought, he thought it necessary, "in spite of the present state of research," to include a fourth social system into the typology: the protest movement (Luhmann, 1998, p. 813).

Unlike organizational systems, protest movements do not coordinate "decisions" but rather "reasons, commitments, and links" (Luhmann, 1998, p. 850). Neither can they assume the existence of a formal membership, and so they suffer from a chronic lack of personnel. It is true that that interaction is present everywhere and is indispensable to movements – especially in mass public demonstrations – as a dramatic way of demonstrating "commitment." However, in contrast to systems of interaction, the "sense" of interaction in protest movements goes beyond a single face-to-face encounter. "Rather, for the participants, it is configured from the highly individual problems of the 'search for meaning' and 'self-realization,' which allow themselves to be mixed and exploited, in an always precarious manner, through a social approach" (Luhmann, 1998, p. 851).

Unlike the interaction or the organization, the protest movement "defines its limits through thematic interests tied to a disposition to appear in public and protest. The indeterminacy of its formal membership is made up for by means of exhortations. It is true that it can be an organization with a solid nucleus, that it has meetings in which issues and strategy are discussed; however, it does not perceive that these constitute an identity.

Rather, it has faith in the explosive potential of the issues and in the insufficiency of official reaction [on the part of the political system, to deal with or resolve those issues], which it sees as the attractor that constitute the movement. In this sense, it must act and appear as though opinion itself made demands and protests" (Luhmann, 2000, p. 315).

In their internal structure, protest movements are different in terms of the center/periphery scheme. In spite of "the imprecise boundaries and the fluctuation in membership, there is a central group that is more committed than the rest, that cultivates more personal contacts, that meets more frequently among itself, and that drives discussion about strategy. This nucleus is made up of people who become the movement's reference points to external observers, and who are characterized as being better informed and more disposed to mobilize, should the occasion present itself. In contrast, those on the periphery of the movement are followers, who can occasionally be involved in mobilizations, and whose participation is expected when called for. Without the periphery, this type of differentiation would not exist, that is, there would be no center. Finally, the movement has a good number of sympathizers who, although they support its objectives, do not necessarily commit actively to achieve them. The assumption of the existence of this group of sympathizers helps the movement to avoid isolating itself and to convince itself that it represents the public interest (Luhmann, 2000, p. 317).

Finally, Luhmann identifies three "system performances" that movements offer to society as a whole. First, they call attention to problems of functional differentiation that specialized function systems (like politics, law, and economics) cannot resolve structurally. In this context we can understand the formation of protest movements and their mobilization as "a protest against functional differentiation and its effects" (Luhmann, 1990, p. 234). Second, protest movements assume the task of correcting the insufficient self-reflection in modern society, "not by doing it better, but rather by doing it differently" (Luhmann, 1993b, p. 143). The third and final system performance consists of serving as

social "immune systems." Protest movements contradict and reject the communication of the function systems. In this sense, they serve as generators of conflict, that is, of communicative contradictions that reject systemic-functional affirmations, by means of which, through resistance, they subject those specialized systems to a "reality test," forcing them to revise their operations, the form of their autopoiesis, and their system performance (Luhmann, 1984, p. 504).

3 CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE SYSTEMIC CONCEPTION OF PROTEST MOVEMENTS

Although Luhmann's conception of protest movements is to a certain extent intellectually stimulating, it is nonetheless very general and, above all, extremely imprecise⁴. First, it is highly problematic to reduce social movements to "protest," as Rucht and Roth (1992, p. 32) have already pointed out. Focusing on the public demonstration of discontent ignores the social and cultural infrastructure that makes protest possible. An investigation of the conflicts surrounding social movements must go further than an examination of mass mobilization in the streets.

Second, it is highly debatable that social protest arises out of collateral effects of the operation of function systems. Beyond the extreme slogans of some present-day antiglobalization movement's organizations, no social protest movement today takes an abstract position against the functioning of the systems of science, law, religion, politics, or economics, that is, of a functionally differentiated society. Rather, such movements are against specific decisions of concrete organizations of those systems. Only in this way can

⁴ Here I leave aside the question of Luhmann's presumed "political preferences," which are idiosyncratic, and which cannot be simply be imputed to those who work with systems theory in order to label them as technocrats, social engineers, or conservatives. Nor is the opposite true: that those who dedicate themselves to the study of movements are *ipso facto* enlightened, progressive, and politically conscious of the general interests of humanity—independent of what all this means. On this point, see Rucht and Roth (1992) and Fuchs (2006).

they identify the target of the protest, define their solutions and demands, and, if it reaches that point, enter into the game of pressure and negotiation with their counterparts. To think otherwise means to caricature these movements as quixotic and lacking a sense of reality. Nothing suggests that they are.

The belief that social movements, driven by the communication of fear, mobilize against the functional differentiation of society in the abstract, leads to the mistaken impression that these movements have no "alternatives," no models of social integration that are alternatives to the reigning social differentiation. This misinterpretation leads to the characterization of their behavior as "reactive". Actually, with the phenomenon of professionalization of social movement organizations, their membership includes experts at least as qualified as those of the function systems they oppose. These "internal experts" develop viable political, legal, and technical proposals that aim to solve the problems they protest by taking a different approach. There is no reason to deny the "cognitive" nature of their approach to solving problems.

Likewise, Luhmann's conception of protest movements can be described as "synchronist." He not only focuses his attention on the moment of public protest – as if the key to the explanation of the phenomenon were found solely in that moment – but he also has nothing substantive to say about the prehistory of the movement. This fault can easily be corrected by including a diachronic dimension in the analysis that, in reconstructive terms, accounts for the conditions of possibility that make up the movement and better locates it in its political, social, cultural, and economic context. There is no necessity that explains the emergence of particular social movements. Indeed, their existence is improbable. However, once they have been formed, it is necessary to shed some light on their past. In this way, we can find clues about such factors as their patterns of behavior, the development of their scheme of observation, the premises of their decision-making, and the alliances they form with other actors and organizations.

Like the dominant theories of social movements, systems theory is politico-centric. Although its counterparts cannot avoid it, systems theory has no need to straitjacket itself in this way. On the contrary, its polycentric conception of the functionally differentiated society grants no superior or privileged hierarchical status to the political system or to the examination of social movements exclusively in relation to politics. It should take advantage of this freedom to consider the multiple links that such movements cultivate with other function systems.

Luhmann's implication that "fear" is the motivation and the autopoietic engine behind the formation and mobilization of movements not only seems arguable, but also overlooks the material, moral, and ideological interests that accompany the struggles of social movements⁵. To consider self-realization and individual existential meaning⁶ as fundamental dimensions of social movements is not mistaken – it is a well-known issue in the literature – but it is one-dimensional: it once again leaves out material interest, social influence and argues in terms of political power.

By understanding the logic of (re)production of protest movements through the communication of fear and by identifying these phenomena with the parts of the world most subjected to social differentiation, systems theory is prevented from saying anything meaningful about social movements in other regions. If this model of protest movements is inadequate for more "industrialized" societies (judging by the nearly unanimous rejection it has received from specialists), it could hardly describe those on the "periphery," as the forms of constitution, organization, and mobilization of movements in these parts of the world have little to do with the systems theory description of the phenomenon⁷. Finally, the

⁵ In any case, it would be necessary to understand fear in terms of the role played by the emotions in social movements. On this point, see Bericat Alastuey (2000), Van Troost (2013) and Gould (2013).

⁶ Or personal and collective identity, as Hellman argues (1996, esp. Ch. 4).

⁷ And the reason is not that functional differentiation is less extensive in these societies, as Luhmann and his followers seem to believe. This belief is an updated version of the evolutionist notions that have done so much damage to the

description of the structure of protest movements in the center versus the periphery is not completely wrong, but it is very simplistic, as the distinction between activists, followers, and sympathizers does not account for the complex internal organization of movements, positions of authority, roles, power relations, or conflicts, or the production and distribution of collective resources and goods that characterize these movements.

The shortcomings in Luhmann's conception of protest movements that I have pointed out thus far have their origin in two sources: First, Luhmann is unaware of the rich and varied debate about social movements of the last five decades. At least that is the conclusion one is forced to draw after reviewing the bibliographies of the works where he addresses these questions. His reflections on the topic are based on observation of the media. Second, the theoretical difficulties in Luhmann's approach derive from his lack of interest in putting his claims to an empirical test⁸.

For all of these reasons, it is not at all surprising that the major currents in the study of social movements have ignored the systems approach. Can anything then be learned from it? The abstractness of its observations and pronouncements is not very attractive to those in this subfield of sociology who are used to validating their claims with extensive fieldwork, empirical information, statistical data, and archival material concerning specific social movements, and to using comparative analysis to make general claims. In sum,

development of the social sciences in general, and of systemic thinking in sociology in particular. There is no reason to expect the "non-dominant" societies to evolve in the same historical way – that is, contingently – like part of Europe, the United States, or Japan, for example. Instead of introducing ad hoc concepts, like *alopoiesis* (Neves, 1996), we should describe and explain these societies – and, in our particular case, the social movements that emerge in them – just as they are, and not as they should be according to normative visions. A robust model of protest systems has to include different types of such systems and be sensitive to regional and national differences. Otherwise, a theory of global society is nothing but empty talk. On this point, see Carballo (2012).

⁸ Systems research on movements—characterized principally by a set of elaborations and theoretical developments of Luhmann's premises—has, in the meantime, taken the trouble to review and critique the state of the art of the sociology of social movements (Japp, 1984, 1986; Ahlemeyer, 1995; Hellmann, 1996; Virgl, 2011). However, this work still suffers from an enormous lack of empirical testing, meaning that the authors have no real idea of the utility or validity of their efforts. As far as I know, the only empirical investigations that draw on an (unorthodox) systems approach have been done outside of Germany (Estrada Saavedra, 2007, 2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2014, 2016, 2025; Guerra Blanco, 2013).

students of social movements who locate themselves within one of the major paradigms or their many offshoots would seem to have no reason to review their analytic framework, to risk exploring a terrain that is possibly useful but unknown and inhospitable to empirical methods. Perhaps this is a conservative attitude, but it is a healthy and responsible one given the little that systems theory has to offer.

4 TOWARD AN OUTLINE OF A MODEL OF PROTEST SYSTEMS

Given these criticisms, it might seem that the best course would be to discreetly abandon the topic and concern ourselves with the subjects Luhmann approached with greater acumen. However, just because his model of protest movements is conceptually and empirically weak does not mean that it cannot be substantially improved. In fact, a complete reworking of this model is necessary, based more on his theory of *social systems* than on his theory of *society*, "without consideration for the aesthetics of the theory" (Luhmann, 1998, p. 847).

This concern about Luhmann's theory of protest movements is not just a stubborn insistence on seeing social systems in everything. It is, rather, the unresolved problems in the dominant theories of the field that require us to look for alternatives (Ahlemeyer, 1995, esp. Ch. 1; Hellmann, 1996, p. 15; Estrada Saavedra; Guerra Blanco, 2012). But before moving in this direction it is worth explaining why it is better to use the term "protest system" rather than social or protest movement. The reasons for this are many, but the most important is to avoid the modern connotations suggested by the term "movement," as these stand in the way of a correct understanding of the phenomenon. The concept of the movement belongs to a historical, social, and epistemological horizon that, with the formation of complex society, we have left behind: namely, the physicalist mechanism and the Enlightenment optimism of early modernity. Our mental images associated with the

word "movement" make reference to "something that moves in society, that is recognized by the fact that it is differentiated from the static, from the social order, and that is recognizable when it moves" (Melucci, 2002, p. 81). The word also evokes the image of progressive historical forces embodying a liberating Reason, just as late eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophers understood the French Revolution. And to the extent that Reason was associated with the notion of a universal subject, the idea of a subject as a corporate personality with a clear and transparent identity and an undivided will resounded with the concept of the social movement.

In light of these considerations, I will sketch out in what follows a model of protest systems that is methodologically compatible with empirical investigation⁹.

First, it is necessary to break with the self-satisfaction of the systems orthodoxy and offer a complex conception of protest without the fear of crossing categorical boundaries. Social movements are hybrids that cannot be pigeonholed into "fundamental" and "autonomous" types of social systems like "the interaction," "the organization," or "society" (Luhmann, 2005). The late introduction of the concept of "social movement" into the architecture of his theory of society merely reflects Luhmann's hesitancy to recognize the fact of its essential heterogeneity. When it failed to correspond point by point to one of his three basic types of social systems, Luhmann found himself forced to expand the triad by adding a new type of system. However, his passion for classification oversimplified the characteristics of movements in order to better highlight their difference. The fact is that social movements are actually a composite form that in varying degrees combines the other types of social systems. Does this assertion contradict the theoretical construction of the German sociologist? Perhaps, but that is not important if it improves upon his ideas.

⁹ For a complete and detailed account, I refer to Estrada Saavedra (2015).

A protest systems is characterized by its creation and reproduction through communications oriented toward a conflict. These communications are expressed thematically as mobilizations of protest against various opponents (the government, religious organizations, business, the media) or against the unexpected consequences of activity of the organizations of functional social systems (politics, law, the economy, science, or the arts) (Ahlemayer, 1989, 1995; Luhmann, 1993a, 1996, 1998; Japp, 1984, 1986a, 1986b, 1990; Hellmann, 1996, 1998, 2000).

Upon differentiating itself from its environment, every protest system achieves its autopoiesis, creating its own structures of communication, organization, mobilization, production, and distribution of resources and collective goods. In this way, it creates its own form, that is, the protest; it constructs an observational perspective (criticism and denunciation)¹⁰; develops mechanisms of direction (elites and leadership), recruitment (selection and motivation of membership), and identity (differentiation from environment); and sets up alliances and networks of communication and interaction with other systems of protest, organizations, groups, associations, and parties. Thanks to all these features, the system is able to initiate protest events and conflicts with other social systems, especially with organizations of function systems like universities, businesses, churches, political parties, newspapers, research centers, banks, and courts.

The complexity of a protest system can also be understood by means of the distinction between different levels of analysis. In effect, any protest system can be observed through the lens of the system/environment difference: its internal elements, processes, functions, and structures, as well as its external communications, interpenetrations, and structural coupling with the other social systems (including function systems) of its environment.

¹⁰ Actually, the form *protest/issue* must be complemented with the form *demand/negotiation*.

For methodological purposes, I distinguish between three levels of analysis for all protest systems: the micro, the meso, and the macro, which correspond to the social systems of interaction, organization, and society. Depending on the particular research interest, one can focus on one, two, or all of these at the same time. What is important is an awareness of the complexity of the subject and of the multiple approaches the model allows¹¹.

On the micro level, we can study the diverse interactions in everyday life of those involved in protest systems. For example, we can explore their experiences and the meaning they find in their participation. We can also give an account of their values and beliefs, and the daily forms in which they create a shared culture of cooperation and solidarity that can be reactivated and refunctionalized in cases of crisis and conflict. At this level we can also examine gender relations between men and women: the different forms of involvement they have with the mobilization and how these differences are reflected in power relations between the sexes¹². With this micro-sociological approach we can understand different actors' diverse processes of identification with the protest system, and the effect their participation may have on their personal identities, their self-perception, their bodies, and their emotions.

In abstract terms, the "members" and "participants" of a protest system are "components" of that system. To refer to them as "persons" or "actors" is an abbreviated way of saying that from the perspective of the protest system, they are the product of systemic schemes, on the one hand, that permit structural coupling between psychic and bodily systems, and social systems, on the other. As "schemes" they should be considered part of the protest system itself. But as psychic or bodily systems, it is of course necessary

¹¹ See Estrada Saavedra (2016b) for an extensive development of this topic.

¹² The same can be done for different age groups, for example, such as adults versus youth, or ethnic groups, such as *mestizo* versus indigenous.

to treat them as part of their environment (Luhmann, 2005b; Japp, 2008; Guerra Blanco, 2013).

On the meso level of analysis, we can look at the organizational aspect of the protest system. In particular, we can study its membership as a grouping, on the one hand, of leaders, activists, followers, and sympathizers, and of elites and social bases, on the other. To the extent that the system has a collective organization, it is necessary to take into account different roles and positions of authority, with their respective tasks and functions, as well as the mechanisms of representation and decision-making. Beyond the question of organizational hierarchies, this analytic level can shed light on the internal relations of power between different individual or collective actors¹³. It is here that we can understand the functioning of normative mechanisms of discipline, control, and coercion within the protest system, as well as intrasystemic channels of communication.

Studying the organization of protest systems also allows us to explain how they form their membership through the use of schemes, and how they generate mechanisms of identification of individual members with the collective. This is also where the schemes of observation and the semantics of the protest system – whose function is understanding and giving meaning to the environment by means of a thematic reduction of complexity – are defined. And it is at this analytic level that we can follow the path to the production and distribution of collective goods and services by the protest system, as well as the functions carried out by its different specialized subsystems (for example, political strategy and management, media work, legal defense, membership mobilization, the staging of symbolic protest, finances, political/ideological education).

At this level, the identity of the protest system is configured around the whole set of operations that distinguish the system from its environment. In this sense, we can speak of

¹³ On social systems as "actors," see Japp (2008), Hutter and Teubner (1994) and Willke (2000).

an "operative identity" of the system – a result of its autopoiesis. It is necessary to note here, of course, that the systemic identity includes the daily processes of identification that take place on the micro level, as well as the symbolic-discursive identity it presents in an expressive way to its allies, its opponents, and the public.

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that on the meso level, the components of the protest system include not only the individuals that make up its membership (construed schematically as persons), but also all the organizations, associations, collectives, and groupings of various types that are related to it (construed schematically as collective actors)¹⁴. In other words, the protest system is more than the sum of the individuals and organizations that make it up.

The final analytic level is the macro. Here we can approach the relations of alliance or conflict the protest system has with various actors and organizations from different segments of its environment. Likewise, it is possible to understand contemporaneously how it is inscribed in the logic of different function systems (such as law, science, the economy, the media, art, politics, and sports). This in turn allows us to see how these function systems observe and react to protest. From the macro perspective it is thus possible to study the conflict in which the protest system and its opponents are enveloped: the public staging of protest, contentious events, the reaction of public opinion, and the processes of dialogue and negotiation among those involved. In the same way we can see the effects of operation

¹⁴ Collective actors that, although they are located in the internal environment of the protest system, nonetheless have their own histories and interests, different from those of that system. In themselves and in their individual histories prior to their incorporation into a specific protest system, these organizations, groupings, associations, and collectives can be classified as organizational systems or systems of interaction, as the case may be. Only when they integrate themselves into the protest system do they become constituent elements of that system. In effect, the system constitutes the "unity" of the elements precisely as elements of itself, which it appropriates in order to relate them to each other (Luhmann, 1984, p. 43). Treating these organizations together as elements of the system thus implies confronting a new level of development of the system. In this manner a new reality and complexity emerges (that of the system of protest!) that does not allow of explanation by being broken up into more elemental components. As they are now related elements of the system, organizations and other groupings behave differently than if they were not components of that system.

and communication of function systems in the formation and mobilization of protest systems.

Considering this dimension, we can also understand the possible long-term social and cultural changes that the conflict itself in general, and involvement in the protest system in particular, might have in the daily life of participants and the population in general. Finally, we can trace here the redefinition of relations of power and domination in society as a product of the conflict, as well as a possible redistribution of resources between opponents.

These last two points should lead us to broaden our analytic time frames and understand the protest systems historically, even before its existence as such, in order to account for the elements and causes of the diverse social, political, economic, and cultural contexts that have come together contingently to establish the possibilities so that, in particular circumstances, the protest system is established.

5 CONCLUSIONS

In these pages I have carried out a reexamination of Niklas Luhmann's theory of society with the aim of developing greater complexity in its conceptual framework, particularly in that part that is relevant to protest movements. In spite of the clear limitations of the systemic conception of these movements, there are various advantages to thinking of them as social systems. First, this approach offers an alternative to the dominant theories that seek to define their unity and specific difference (Ahlemeyer, 1995; Hellmann, 1996). Second, it provides us with a general theory rather than a set of theories of social movements. Third, the phenomenon can be studied simultaneously within the same framework in complementary micro, meso, and macro contexts, corresponding to interaction, organization, and society, respectively. Fourth, by understanding movements as protest systems, they can be liberated from teleologies (such as those of autonomy,

democratization, or historicity), from internal organizational hierarchies, and from the achievement of predetermined or exclusive ends (such as creating a collective identity, obtaining collective goods, or gaining recognition in the polity as legitimate actors). Fifth, given the globalized vision of some social movements (the so-called antiglobalization or global justice movements), the theory of social systems offers a better conceptual approach to their relationship to global society than traditional actionalist theories: it is more feasible to observe the simultaneity of operations and the flow of communication among protest systems in different geographic areas than to observe actions, which are necessarily local. Sixth, the concept of the system/environment difference frees the study of collective action from understanding such activity exclusively in relation to politics. The political system is only one of the multiple environments in which protest systems can be studied; they can also be examined, for example, in the context of law, religion, the media, or science¹⁵. Finally, the protest systems model does not mechanically reduce the formation of those systems (their organization, macro-structural changes, opportunity structures, etc.) to a single cause; rather, it considers the contingency of an internal and external multicausality.

Viewed as protest systems, social movements are no longer conceived as fixed, objective, or indivisibly unified. Rather, it is necessary to consider them as complex phenomena whose unity must constantly be assured in three dimensions: temporally, by means of the selective connection of mobilization events; socially, through the collective limitation of individual action; and objectively, by linked communications focused on a narrow range of issues. In this manner, we are contending with complex systems that are not directly and unilaterally controlled from the center. For this reason, the components of the system acquire a certain internal autonomy; they can establish their own linkages that are not hierarchically overseen, which can open a range of possibilities of action and

¹⁵ Notwithstanding the above, systems theory allows for a complex, dynamic, and multiscale treatment of politics and social protest. In this regard, see Estrada Saavedra (2020).

communication with the interior of the system as well as its environment – possibilities that can be continuously updated (Luhmann 1984, p. 45-63). In this sense, considering the multiple collectives, associations, and organizations as components of a particular subsystem of the protest system, there is no need whatsoever to expect internal coordination between them or a homogeneous perspective from which they make the same determinations of meaning to solve particular problems. Thanks to its organized complexity, the structure of the protest system exerts pressure on its elements, making certain choices of linkages more likely (though not necessary) than others. In other words, the meanings chosen by different components will be relatively similar.

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