

# The Hypercomplex Society

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## Chapter 1

### The Hypothesis of Hypercomplexity

#### Introduction

What kind of society are we entering? Is it the “information society,” as stated by Daniel Bell, and echoed by Alvin Toffler and a vast number of government reports? Is it a utopian “global village” in which everybody—if the bandwidth is large enough—are neighbors, as suggested by American high tech gurus Dertouzos and Negroponte? Is it, with a concept from Bill Gates’s *The Road Ahead*, a phase of “frictionless capitalism,” or are we foreseeing a global collapse such as claimed by the French architect Paul Virilio? Is it, as argued by German sociologist Ulrich Beck, the “risk society”? Or should we use the term “network society,” as in Manuel Castell’s three volumes from 1996-98, *The Rise of the Network Society*, *The Power of Identity*, and *End of Millennium*?

In a recent book (Qvortrup 1998) I have suggested another name: The “hypercomplex society.” The basic thesis of this book is that we are confronting a growing level of complexity, and that social complexity in fact represents the basic problem and challenge of our current society. Consequently, analytical approaches based on, e.g., theories of labor (David Ricardo, Karl Marx, and others) or theories of action and communicative action (Jürgen Habermas and others) should be replaced by an analytical approach based on a theory of complexity. The understanding of the society of the twenty-first century—whether it is called an “information society,” a “network society,” a “knowledge society,” a “learning society”—must then take complexity as its guiding concept. Thus, the differentiation of our current and emerging society is not primarily based on classes determined by the ownership of means of production, but on classes—or, rather, processes of inclusion and exclusion—shaped by the ability to manage complexity. Thus, classes and social inequalities do not disappear, but society is differentiated according to new principles. The basic “civilizing influence”

in current society is not capital, which governs the organization of production processes. The basic civilizing influence in society is the continuous development of functionally differentiated subsystems as a way of handling complexity, the evolutionary principle being that external complexity can be managed only by the development of a matching level of internal complexity. Again, this does not necessarily lead to greater social equality, but to the development of new mechanisms of social inequality, and the creation of a society characterized by a paradox: The only ideological constancy is the constant absence of a guiding social ideology. Finally, the paradigm of the hypercomplex society does not foresee a utopian future based on the principle of a classless society. It does not understand modern society as a social field divided between systems and lifeworld, developing toward a future, utopian state defined by the principles of communicative action, consensus, and unlimited mutual understanding. And, most certainly, it does not accept that the way toward this utopian state, whether it is called communist, communitarist, or simply fully modern, will be through some kind of state-based dictatorship in which inequalities are dismantled and rationality assumes a dominant position. According to the theory of the hypercomplex society, we are developing toward a society with a large number of functionally differentiated centers, i.e. a polycentric society, in which the stabilizing factor is not a central guiding body or social ideology, but communication-based processes of coordination. Stability is then not the outcome of order and centralization, but of a high level of complexity and decentralization. Here, information and communication technologies are not understood as determining factors, but as socially shaped technologies formed by the need for decentered processes of mutual observation and coordination among social sub-centers.

Thus, the concept of the hypercomplex society is based on a paradigm of complexity, and not on paradigms of work or of communicative action. But 'complexity' is not a new concept. On the contrary, complexity and complexity management are concepts rooted in the rationalistic ideas of eighteenth and nineteenth century philosophy. However, the concept of complexity and the ideal of

complexity reduction as the outcome of rationality are redefined within this paradigm. Originally, this new approach to the understanding of complexity management was introduced by Herbert A. Simon. With the concept of “bounded rationality” he realized that the ideal of the omnipotent “rational man” belonged to the optimistic belief in progress. It was rooted in a classical European rational philosophy transferred to scientific theories of management in the twentieth century, and it celebrated the modern organization as the triumph of scientifically based order, or—in a totally different context—it celebrated in political theories the socialist state as a societal organization, transforming a chaotic society into a planned paradise, founded upon “dialectical materialism” as the basis of “scientific socialism.” It is an illusion that organizations and societies are developing, or should develop, toward a final state in which they are guided by one central instance of unlimited rationality. When organizational and social procedures develop, they do so not in order to reach a final state of total control or stability, but in order to compensate for their bounded rationality. Thus, a “final, utopian state” does not exist per se; it exists instead as a dynamic state of equilibrium in which mechanisms and procedures for mutual observation and communication have developed to neutralize tendencies toward social entropy.

Thus, Simon is one source of inspiration, and the parallel development of complexity theories from Norbert Wiener’s original theory of cybernetics to so-called second-order cybernetics represents another. The understanding that social systems are not guided by any external subject, but can be guided or formed only by themselves, is essential to the understanding of hypercomplex society. Actually, the idea of second-order cybernetics represents a bridge between Simon’s concept of bounded rationality and the main inspirational source of this book, the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann’s analysis of modern society.

For Luhmann, the starting point is complexity theory, and he arrives at an analysis of ways in which complexity can be dealt with. Luhmann has demonstrated how modern society, through social evolution, has developed into a social system with significant capacity for complexity management.

If one should summarize his rich analysis of social systems in one—although rather long—sentence, it would be: current society is developing toward a polycentric and thus polycontextural social system, which applies different codes of self-observation related to different positions of observation, in order to manage an increasingly complex environment (Luhmann 1996b, p. 44). Its self-produced environment is complex in the sense of space because we live in a global society. It is complex in the sense of time because we live in a society that changes at an ever-increasing rate.

However, on at least one important point my concept and analysis of the hypercomplex society is different from Luhmann's theory of modern social systems. We cannot, as Luhmann suggests, limit ourselves to observing the current society as a modern society, differentiating only between tradition and modernity, or between "Altzeit" and "Neuzeit." According to my analysis, a new phase has emerged since the twentieth century. It is different from modernity because complexity has been replaced by hypercomplexity, anthropocentrism by polycentrism, unlimited rationality by bounded rationality. Here, my basic source of inspiration is Michel Foucault and his concept of "epistemes," of historical periods characterized by a certain social epistemology, i.e., a system of discourses and knowledge horizons (Foucault 1975). While Luhmann talks about modernity's multiplication of societal epistemes, Foucault maintains that a certain historical period is characterized by one specific episteme (Teubner 1989, p. 737f). These two views can be combined, if the premise is that the hypercomplex society is characterized by an episteme of polycentrism.

It is however important to emphasize that this concept of a hypercomplex, polycentric society differs from the observation of our current society as a "postmodern" or "postindustrial" society. My aim is not to identify "absences" or "negations" from earlier phases, nor is it the desire to locate potentialities in which anything goes compared with the implicitly claimed limitations and restrictions of modernity. The paradigm that I present in this book focuses on identifying the positive social characteristics of an emerging society. This is not a society that can be characterized primarily by its difference from something wellknown. It is an emerging social system that can be

identified according to its own structures and dynamics. The term I have coined for this emerging social system is the “hypercomplex society.”

## **The Hypercomplex Society**

But what is hypercomplexity? A short definition says that hypercomplexity is complexity inscribed in complexity, e.g., second-order complexity. As an example, hypercomplexity is the result of one observer’s description of another observer’s descriptions of complexity, or it is the result of a complex observer’s description of its own complexity (Luhmann 1984, p. 637 [1995, p. 471] and Luhmann 1997, p. 139; see also *ibid.*, pp. 876 and 892).

Based on this concept, in the words of Niklas Luhmann already referred to, the emerging society can be characterized as a polycentric and thus polycontextural social system, which applies different codes of self-observation related to different positions of observation: The economy applies the code of profit and loss; the religious system the code of transcendence and immanence; the scientific system the code of truth; the political system the code of power; and so on (Luhmann 1996b, p. 44). This means that the concept of universal “truth” or consensus is replaced by the need for transjunctional operations, which make it possible to switch codes and to decide which code is appropriate for specific social operation. One precondition for this is that a code must be capable of observing the world (and itself) as the differentiation of other codes (i.e., creating a hypercomplex operation).

When a society developing toward hypercomplexity observes itself, it does so by identifying a change in social semantics from *anthropocentrism*, which was introduced in the Italian Renaissance and reached its peak with the modern philosophy of Kant, based on the transcendental subject as the center of social observation and communication, to a social semantics based on *polycentrism*, which was implicitly prepared by the phenomenological theory of the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) at the beginning of the twentieth century, and developed by among many

others the German American mathematician Gotthard Günther (1900-1984), the English logician George Spencer Brown (1923-), American second order cyberneticians such as Heinz von Foerster (1911-), and in the social sciences in particular by the already mentioned German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1927-1998). In each of their fields of research they have contributed to the as yet unfulfilled self-identification of society as hypercomplex.

Finally, a number of social domains in the current hypercomplex society can be investigated. For instance, business organizations develop a growing number of observational codes (drawing upon the economy, but also upon ethics, ecology, etc.) in order to handle their hypercomplex social environment. In addition to economic accounts, they use, e.g., ethical accounts or ecological accounts to match external complexity with observational complexity. Art has moved from a linear perspective (and a normative definition of aesthetics) to a polycentric perspective (and a reflective definition of aesthetics). The so-called public sphere has changed from a “place”—a lifeworld—in society, in which “common sense” (consensus) is expected, into a specific meta-level observation and communication system based on public opinion, which isn’t an essential thing but is an observation and communication code based on the distinction between the public and the private. In the public sphere we do not agree, but we observe each other according to special criteria.

However, before turning toward these aspects of the hypercomplex society, I shall present the basic hypothesis of hypercomplexity in more detail.

### **The Hidden Problems of Complexity in the “Information Society”: From Tradition-Based to Decision-Based Social Structures**

Descriptions and analyses of modern society are not usually based on thoroughly elaborated theories; instead they are the result of superficial labeling, whereby a single phenomenon is used as the basis for a generalized term: Some call the current society a “risk society” (Beck 1986), apparently because of the large risk potential of modern technologies. Others use the phrase

“information society,” either because of the dissemination of information and communication technologies or because of the asserted amount of “information” in society.

The label “risk society” has already been critically discussed (e.g. Luhmann 1991). But what about the label “information society”? If the label is used because of the dissemination of information and communication technologies, we should also be able to talk of the “steam engine society,” or “electricity society.” However, a certain type of technology does not characterize society’s social structure, and even if it did—or if it had influenced the development of its social structures in a certain direction—the characterization of society should be based on the form of social structures, not on a new or dominating technology. If the label is used on the basis of the large amount of “information” in society, “information” is presumed to be a quantifiable thing, a sort of liquid that can be sent through pipes and stored in containers. However, this has nothing to do with the accepted scientific definition of information as a matter of probability (Shannon and Weaver), popularized in Gregory Bateson’s definition of information as a difference that makes a difference. Still, it seems to be the basis of the self-understanding of “information society” gurus that information is a thing or a substance similar to material wealth, and the more we have, the better off we are. The “machine system” producing this material wealth is digital technology because it transforms analogue materials into a common denominator, digital substance.

Understood in this way digital technologies represent the peak technology of anthropocentrism. The anthropocentric society is based on a belief in the unlimited power of human reason, which again is the unfolding of the principle of the universal language of the transcendental subject (cf. Leibniz’s *characteristica universalis*). It is exactly the universal language that has been brought into reality by digital machinery. Consequently, according to Nicholas Negroponte, we are entering a global society based on the principles of a “local digital community” (Negroponte 1995, p. 19). Here, with the support of digital machinery, the implicit claim is for an extreme individualism with tailor-made commodities, individualized information channels, flexible organizations and personalized

interaction systems, which can be realized within the framework of the simple social structures of a traditional local community. The line of reasoning is that digital machinery can translate the universal reasoning capacity of the human being into a global brain.

The same vision was presented two years later by Negroponte's colleague at MIT, Michael Dertouzos. In his book *What Will Be*, he foresees "a twenty-first-century village marketplace, where people and computers buy, sell and freely exchange information and information services" (this vision is basic to the book and thus repeated three times, first by Bill Gates in the foreword and then twice by Dertouzos himself; cf. Dertouzos 1997 pp. xiii, xv, and 9f). The information society will consist of a huge number of such village marketplaces, which can integrate banks, health care services, etc. and at the same time connect "people at a hundred million computers who might join together for a truly global event" (ibid., p. 15).

But what about the complexity problem occurring from the connection of hundreds of millions of people within the simplistic social structure of a village marketplace? It is obvious that the potential problem to tackle, when all humans' social actions are made communicatively accessible, is how *not* to let this happen and to avoid a global complexity death. Dertouzos seems partly aware of this problem: Opening one's e-mail system to the global community can be compared to opening the front door of one's private home and inviting everybody, all six billion individuals, inside for a chat and a cup of tea (ibid., p. 91).

My conclusion is that information and communication technologies don't present gateways to a golden global village community, where unlimited amounts of information run in the streets, as did milk and honey in former utopias. Instead, in the so-called information society we are confronting an immense challenge to social complexity exactly because so many social actions have become communicatively accessible. What began with the emergence of the "civilizing influence of capital" (cf. Karl Marx), the journeys of discovery in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the printing press reaches its peak with the global digital economy, global mass tourism and terrorism,

and the global broadcasting systems of the twentieth century and the broadband Internet of the twenty-first century.

The complexity problem is the basic challenge of the information society, and it can be managed only partly by electronic filters, search engines, etc. First and foremost, what is required is the development of our social structures and institutions into complexity-management systems that must be much more sophisticated than they are today. Information and communication technologies play a paradoxical role. On the one hand, they are reasons for the emerging problems because they accelerate “electronic proximity” (cf. Dertouzos). On the other hand, they represent the necessary tools for handling the problems because the only way to manage social complexity is to establish communication-based couplings between people and institutions. Thus, a sophistication of society must go hand in hand with a sophistication of information and communication technologies. Therefore, the first and most important challenge is to develop an analysis and an understanding of society that matches the level of social complexity. But let me emphasize that there is no contradiction between the analysis of society and the development of the tools of information technology. On the contrary, the latter can take place only on the basis of an appropriate description of society. My hypothesis of an emerging hypercomplex society is meant as an exploratory guide into the complexities of our current society.

### **The Hypothesis of the Hypercomplex Society**

As argued, I suggest labeling the current society the “hypercomplex society.” I have chosen this concept not simply because current society is becoming “more complex” than earlier societies, i.e. individuals have communicative access to more actions than individuals living in earlier societies. For me, ‘complexity’ is a relative, not an absolute, concept, and it is a question not only of the number of elements in the observed environment, but also of the coupling capacity of the observer. Furthermore, I would be highly skeptical about comparing a traditional, closed society integrated by

systems of rumors with a global society based on the mutual observations of the market. The question of which of the two is more complex is meaningless, because it presupposes that a common standard exists. The reason for choosing the concept of hypercomplexity is the assumption that the so-called information society is based on another mechanism of structuration than in earlier societies: It is based on informed decisions, rather than on *ex ante* given principles.

The hypercomplex society is a society in which almost all structures are created through decisions, and not by “traditions,” “destiny,” etc. (cf. Luhmann 1996; Luhmann 1997, pp. 1088-1096). Take the everyday example of parents who buy mobile telephones for their children. The reason for this is that we—parents and children—expect that what we do should find its rationale in decisions and not in destiny. We let our children stay in town late at night because we are in potential communicative contact, implying that we are in a position to react to any situation with a decision. Our children—so we think—are not in the hands of blind destiny because we are “there,” or to be more precise, because their actions are communicatively accessible. Similarly, organizational behavior is based on what is called calculated risk. We want to—and we believe that we are able to—make decisions for ourselves and for our children and/or organizations (to make “informed choices”), and therefore information is needed. We don’t accept that they are in the hands of God or some other external power.

This may be the implicit *raison d’être* of the concept of the information society. In order to make decisions—to do this and not something else—information is required. And to meet this requirement, immense amounts of data must be available.

In a general sense, this represents the transition from a social semantics based on universal transcendental or ontological forces to a society based on decisions made by social agents, i.e., the transition from theocentrism to anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism—the idea that the human being is the rational decision-making center of society—has been an ideal ever since the Renaissance, and it achieved a dominant ideological position with the age of enlightenment. The analysis so far,

regarding the transition from a tradition-based to a decision-based society, counts only for the transition from traditional to modern society, i.e., to a society based on the belief in unlimited human rationality. Thus, the ideal that social structures are created through decisions represents a necessary, but not a sufficient, criterion for current society as hypercomplex. An additional criterion must be sought.

Here, I would suggest that we apply the factor of social complexity. With the development of modern infrastructures, and in particular through new media, not least the global Internet, human as well as organizational individuals have access to social actions on a worldwide basis. If society can be defined as comprising all actions that are communicatively accessible, our current society is a globalized one. We have, in the words of Hans-Magnus Enzensberger (Enzensberger 1993), communicative access to an immense number of civil wars, and we have all experienced the fact that we live “in a society” with those people whose actions are communicatively accessible, e.g., it is a well-known fact that television-based images of refugees force us to feel socially responsible for people with whom we earlier had no communicative contact. The same goes for enterprises, even the smallest, which *de facto* act in a global market.

However, this is still a quantitative argument. The important aspect—and that which represents a difference that makes a difference—is that those actions that are communicatively accessible cannot be reduced to one observational criterion. While European anthropologists in the eighteenth century traveled abroad with observational and analytical expectations founded upon the distinctions of cultivated/natural and civilized/wild, they returned with the conclusion—or rather, after centuries of observation-based reflections, they were forced to conclude—that they had not met “natural” or “primitive” people, but *other* cultures. Thus, their observational experience did not confirm expectations that the unknown other represented a contingent set of phenomena compared with European cultural necessity, i.e., that the unknown environment and its inhabitants represented a deviation from an earlier, already fully developed European civilization and that they lived in a state

of primitivism, which could be observed and analytically included in some earlier evolutionary phase in the already fully developed position represented by the observer. Instead, what they observed, or what they through their observations were forced to conclude, was the meeting of different cultures, i.e., of two sets of contingent phenomena: the European culture and one out of a vast number of other cultures.

This experience, which still has not been accepted by all observers in the so-called Western world, can be divided into three aspects. First, it was gradually realized that a complex observing system met an equally complex observed system. Second, it was realized that instead of a division between an active observer and a passive observed, the assumed passive observed system appeared to be actively observing as much as the original observing system. Consequently, the situation developed into mutual observation and adaptation. Third—and this was by far the biggest cultural shock—it was gradually realized that compared with other cultures, the “Western” or “civilized” observers did not represent an ontologically or transcendently more central, natural, or universal standard for observations. Actually, the implicit conclusion to be drawn was that no universal observational standard existed. The only possibility remaining was to simultaneously observe the other and to observe one’s own observations, knowing that the observed other is doing the same.

As a consequence, the understanding of the problem of complexity has changed. The days have passed in which it was realistic to assume that environmental complexity could be tackled by a powerful, centralized rational subject. Today, the belief in unlimited rationality has been replaced by the concept of bounded rationality (Simon 1997), reflecting the social fact that in every decisional situation the number of possibilities, not only for observation-based conclusions, but also for determining the premises of observations, exceeds the capability to make decisions.

Thus, these are the two factors that qualify as criteria for the concept of an emerging hypercomplex society. The first is that society is based on the ideal of informed decisions. Through the realization of this ideal, a traditional theocentric society, based on and structured by an ontologically or

transcendentally given external “force,” is replaced by a modern society, in which every individual expects to be capable of reaching informed decisions, either as an individual human being, as an organization, or as a collective decision-making body, united either in a utopian *volonté general* or as a dystopian sociotechnical control machine. This modern society can be termed the “anthropocentric” society.

The second qualifying factor is, however, that the very nature of social observation has changed, because the belief in the existence of a universal standard of observation must be given up. A given phenomenon may always also be observed otherwise. The ideal of a universal language or a universal principle, which has driven European thought from Leibniz’s *characteristica universalis* to the positivism of the twentieth century, must be given up not because of practical difficulties in creating this language, but for purely theoretical reasons.

However, the conclusion is not that “anything goes,” as some postmodernists have suggested. It is not that rationality must be given up, but that the ideal of unlimited rationality must be replaced by the concept of bounded rationality, i.e., that a state of hypercomplexity is constituted by the mutual observations and self-observations of complex systems. Or put differently, first-order cybernetics, pointing toward an external steering subject, must be replaced by second-order cybernetics, i.e., stating that the principle of order for any given social or psychic system can be seen only as the outcome of the operations of that system itself. Such systems themselves produce their elements, relations, and conditionalizing forces. This second criterion of qualification supports the transition from anthropocentrism to polycentrism, i.e., from a society that believed in the transcendentally given rational human being as the center to a society that observes itself as a social system with an immense number of communication centers and codes. No individual can couple himself or herself to all these potentialities. Consequently, the starting point of communication is not to establish a connection, or a “link,” but to disconnect, i.e., to reduce the number of couplings to one’s social

environment. Ironically, just as the ideal behind the name must be given up, this social condition is labeled the “information society.”

## Summary

The present book is based on two hypotheses, which are to be developed and tested in the following chapters.

The first hypothesis is that a new social paradigm is emerging in our current society, i.e., the paradigm of hypercomplexity. Hypercomplexity can be defined as second-order complexity, in the sense that it is complexity referring to or being inscribed in complexity. It is not my contention that our current society “is” a hypercomplex society, but that hypercomplexity is a category that can explain a growing number of observation and communication processes in this society. Thus, the premise is that this concept can and will be empirically tested in this book, i.e., that a large number of facts can be explained by the concept of hypercomplexity, and that hypercomplexity constitutes an adequate framework for society’s observation of itself as society.

The second hypothesis is that hypercomplexity supports a theory of development based on three phases or trends, where each is characterized by a dominant social semantics governing the understanding of society.

The first phase can be called *theocentrism*. Theocentrism characterizes a society that can be observed from within an observational mode constituted by a universal entity sitting in an external position: God or destiny. This observational position was introduced by Plato’s metaphor of human life as the life of the cave dweller, a pale shadow of divine reality. But how can this God, who sees and causes everything, be characterized? “Deus est sphaera, cujus centrum ubique, circumferentia nusquam”—God is a sphere whose center is everywhere, and whose circumference is nowhere—the conservative French philosopher Pascal, who fought against the emerging anthropocentrism, put it in his view of Plato’s thesis. The social semantics of theocentrism was translated into a social order

based on a stratified society with God at its apex and the church and the feudal state as religious and political systems of integration, both legitimized by God.

The second phase can be called *anthropocentrism*. Anthropocentrism characterizes a society that can be observed only from within an observational mode constituted by a universal internal position, i.e., from an observational point that is itself part of the complexity of the social system. Here, God as the universal perspective of observation (or, as I would prefer to say, the universal “observation optics”) is replaced by the universal human being—the transcendental subject—as the universal observation optics. In November 1486, this observational position was introduced by the Renaissance philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. “I have placed thee at the centre of the world, that from there thou canst more easily observe what exists in the world around thee,” (Pico 1942, p. 348) according to Pico in what seems to be a brief phase of illusion God says to Adam, while in reality it is humanity that has entered God’s position at the center of the world and expects to maintain this position without any further assistance of God. The understanding of this new, modern social semantics was crowned by Immanuel Kant’s theory of the transcendental subject as the constituting factor of pure, practical and aesthetic reason. It was put into practical reality by Rousseau’s idea of a *contrat social*, the social contract, the principle that constituted the political reality of the nation-states of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and it is still very much the ideal of aesthetics, policy, business, and culture.

Finally, the third, currently emerging phase can be called *polycentrism*. Polycentrism characterizes a society that cannot observe itself or its environment from a single observational position—or, rather, from within a single observational perspective or “optics”—but has to employ a large number of positions of observation, each using its own individual observational code to manage its own social complexity. This implies that no universal point of observation can be found. Furthermore, this means that a large portion of these observations are observations of observations: of others’ observations and of the observer’s own observations. The ideal of a centralized (broadcasted)

observation and communication system is replaced by the ideal of polycentric and polycontextural observation and communication systems. This observational position was introduced by Edmund Husserl's critique of the Kantian epistemology at the beginning of the twentieth century. As he summarized his position in his *Cartesian Meditations* from the 1930s: "wäre das Eigenwesentliche des Anderen in direkter Weise zugänglich, so wäre es bloß Moment meines Eigenwesens, und schließlich er selbst und ich selbst einerlei" (Husserl 1963, p. 139). What Husserl says is that if I had the same access to the other's consciousness as I have to my own, then the other would cease to be foreign, and would instead be a part of me. Critically referring to Kant, Husserl implies that this is of course *not* the case, and that as a consequence the transcendental subject does not exist. The consequences for our understanding of society were elaborated by Niklas Luhmann, and summarized in the already quoted characterization of the social conditions of hypercomplexity from 1996, his lecture *Die neuzeitlichen Wissenschaften und die Phänomenologie* given in Vienna's City Hall on May 25, 1995, to celebrate Husserl's lecture in the same place 60 years earlier: "Die moderne Gesellschaft ist ein polyzentrisches, polykontexturales System. (...) Es muß also (...) transjunktionale Operationen geben, die es ermöglichen, von einer Kontextur (...) in eine andere überzuwechseln und jeweils zu markieren, welche Unterscheidung man für bestimmte Operationen akzeptiert bzw. rejiziert" [Modern society is a polycentric, polycontextural system. (...) Consequently there must be transjunctional operations, which make it possible to go from one contextuality into another, still marking which differentiation is accepted or rejected for specific operations] (Luhmann 1996, p. 44).

Figure 1

These two hypotheses and the resulting idea of a social development from a traditional, theocentric society via a modern, anthropocentric society to the currently emerging hypercomplex, polycentric society are substantiated and defended in the remaining six chapters. In chapters 2, 3, and 4 the social development of frames of self-observation is summarized within the three classical Kantian realms: practical, aesthetic, and pure reason. In chapters 5, 6, and 7 the social shaping of media of self-observation is presented. In chapter 5, an understanding of communication, media, and public opinion specific to the hypercomplex society is suggested in critical discussion of dominating anthropocentric theories such as communication and media theory based on Harold Laswell and his successors, and consensus-praising sociology based on Jürgen Habermas. In chapter 6 the Internet is analyzed as the communication medium particularly shaped by the hypercomplex society. Finally, in chapter 7, culture is analyzed as the generalized self-observational medium of society, i.e., as the meta-optics of society's self-observation. We observe ourselves through the codes of economics, politics, science, art, ethics, etc. But we also observe ourselves as society through culture, and through these self-observational and self-correcting processes the concept of culture has changed from having been a tool for social identity into becoming a tool for social comparison.