A Contribution to the Discussion on Political Steering

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(Translated by Michael King, with assistance from Christian Morgner)

It does not make much sense to ask whether steering is possible in relation to societies or political systems, economic systems or other complex entities. If asked in such a direct way, the question must definitely be answered in the negative. But that means only that the issue is being presented in the wrong way. Of course, attempts at steering have effects. Then again, they do not change everything and often change more and often less than was intended. How then can the area in which steering occurs be designated as a unit that is being steered? Apparently, the question follows the rules of grammar: subject - predicate - object. However, this is inadequate for a scientific analysis.

I see the political advantage of this discourse. It is sufficiently unclear, so that retrospectively one always has two possibilities available for comment. One is that the steering has been successful. The other is that it has failed. At least in this sense, there is a precise correspondence between political steering and political institutions. The idea fits in well with a democracy that distinguishes between government and opposition and, therefore, always has to produce two versions of every matter.

If one wants to go beyond this insight and use the concept of steering in a scientific way, one would at least have to clarify what it means, what it designates and, in attempting this, the linguistically predetermined connection between operation and object dissolves on its own accord.

One can probably assume that references to 'control' or of 'steering' has obtained considerable stimulus from research which has been known as cybernetics and which has been up and running for a good 40 years.[ii] As an alternative, there is really only a pale, conceptually fuzzy one, but one which involves a traditionally saturated concept of "authority". However, the term serves almost exclusively as an image of the enemy, especially since Habermas tried to salvage it in this way, albeit only negatively. I shall disregard this whole discussion and limit myself to showing what conceptual and theoretical clarifications are due to cybernetics.

Even if the new semantics of control and steering have these roots, the consequences are consistently misunderstood and, in particular, the activities of new cybernetics are no longer included. Instead, one observes a blurred combination of state theory and action theory, of the concept of authority and the concept of causation, which at best could refer to classic Max Weber (which is hardly sufficient for today's conceptual requirements). My appeal is, therefore, to specify in more detail what is actually to be discussed.

For instrumental, biological, psychological, and sociological cybernetics, it is clear from the outset that we can speak only of conditions internal to the system. The thermostat steers on the basis of the coupling of input data and output data, i.e., it is based on a purely *system-internal* sequence of information. Only from observers' or engineers' perspective does it appear that they are controlling the temperature of a room. If this were the case, one could just as well say that the temperature of the room controls the thermostat, that is, that it causes the heating to be switched on or off. And with that one would only have a circular closed system again, which can at best be rendered asymmetrical by an observer. In other words, if you want to know who controls whom, you must

observe not the control system itself, but an observer - second order cybernetics. That may not be particularly exciting, because after all, we are free to adopt the standpoint of the second-order observer and to leave unused the possibility of a third-order observation, which would have to reflect the epistemological consequences of second order cybernetics. Two further clarifications therefore appear to me to be more important for the forthcoming discussion, and for this purpose I distinguish between steering and control although in both cases I refer back to cybernetic genealogy and to the English, "control".

Steering is always about, about *difference reduction*, about the reduction of a difference. This can be understood in quite a traditional way as a goal orientation, the goal being thought of as a difference to the state of affairs that would occur if one did nothing. The achievement of the goal reduces this difference - in an ideal case scenario to zero. The concept of difference reduction had the advantage that it makes us independent of the classical teleological language and explains it as an example of a more general principle. (It was precisely the reversal of this that was accomplished at the time by the famous essays by Rosenblueth, Bigelow and others.)

In addition, this concept of difference reduction draws attention to the fact that only certain differences are appropriate as a basis for steering and others are not. We do not seem to want to diminish the difference between true and untrue. Also - despite Hafenstraße [iii]- not the difference between right and wrong. Perhaps we are today in favour of reducing the difference between man and woman, but probably at this precise moment and among those gathered here at present, not the difference between political science and sociology. Could the difference between industry and developing countries be up for discussion? Perhaps also that between central banks and governments?

There can be no real doubt that every society, and especially modern society, is based on the maintenance, indeed the reinforcement, of differences and to this extent cannot by definition be steered. A theory of steering should be able to provide information about the relationship between increasing and decreasing differences, between negative and positive feedback, but what it says about this issue – such as Henri Atlan's "*Entre le cristal er la fumée*" (Atlan 1979) - is still completely beyond the vision of our theorists of steering.

 If one takes seriously the original meaning of control as "contrarotulare", which is still somewhat retained in German, then there is another concern. Control is always a comparison, namely a comparison of *past* texts (records, specifications, norms, goals, etc.) with *present* information. We know that both are internal to the system. But more importantly, the present is subjected to comparison with the past. Of course, this also applies to the past future, so as to include a formulation made by Koselleck, that is, for past target projections. Next year we shall have occasion to remember the French Revolution. This will not only be the monarchist celebration that the French seem to fear, but above all a reminder that what was hoped for and wanted at the time has still not been achieved, has still not come true. But why should it?

Regarding this aspect, the increasing computerization of information processing can give cause for concern. Ironically, precisely because of the speed of data processing, it leads to an ever greater power of the past over the present. Memory (in the neurophysiological sense) is as much a matter of forgetting as it is of remembering. The computer is likely initially to upset the respectively, newly updated equilibrium and you need now only think of our public information and our political practice of constantly comparing a previous year's data, to see the problem.

If one wants to judge the tragedy of dead hands, one must take a step back and clarify the importance of time for the differentiation of system and environment. The starting point for this can be nothing other than the insight that all systems exist simultaneously with their environment and operate simultaneously. There is, neither in the system nor in the environment, a fast-forward to the future nor a lagging behind in the past. Simultaneity cannot be manufactured; it is a given. This also

means that system events and events in the environment coincide in the present. If, under these circumstances, a system wants to achieve some understanding of itself as distinct from its environment, it must take up time not only as a presence, but also as a dimension of meaning. In other words, it must understand the present as a point of distinction between the past and the future, as it were, as a dividing line from which the future is seen as different from the past.

This makes it possible, despite the coincidence of the system and the environment in the present, to take into account the fact that that processes within the system concerning the past, and in the future, (i.e. in the respective non-present horizons of the time dimension) will be different from processes in the environment. In this way, through the means of time, the system can capture the *integration* and moving apart[iv]of *system* and *environment* at the same time (i.e. in the present). However, this requires the ability to imagine the future as different to the past and to refrain from predicting this future from the past.

To the extent that society relies on the principle of functional differentiation, this consequence becomes more acute. The present becomes only relevant as a "differential" (Novalis) of past and the future. And the future is presented alongside a semantics of uncertainty or risk in the present. Today, any hope for a rational calculation of risk has apparently become unstuck, to be replaced by the invitation to get used to it. In any case, functional systems acquire their own identity solely on the basis of the assumption that developments in the system and the environment will diverge in the future despite their present simultaneity and coincidence, and this in a way that differs at the same time from what can be remembered as the past. Perhaps the ultimate reason lies in this time problem, which repeatedly gives one cause to point out the irreducibility and the "Eigenwelt"[v] of *life*. "Je suis la Vie, l'insupportable, l'implacable Vie" ("I am life, unbearable unremitting life"), says every second that escapes Baudelaire's watch.[vi] But what is revealed here, when one ends any further analysis with the word "life"?

If one takes account of this, there are considerable consequences for the issues of steering debated here. Every attempt at steering then runs into two problems. The first is already there in the simultaneity itself. While one steers, that is, updates corresponding operations, something else is happening at the same time billions of times over, which one can neither know nor have cause to influence. Otherwise, the attempt at steering would be eliminated like the eye that sees God.[vii] The steering is therefore, if conceived as a system operation, dependent on reproducing the difference between system and environment and to make use of an "open" future for this operation.

My argument is not that steering is a terrible mistake and that it should be avoided. But we need a theory that can at least grasp such problems, describe them and bring them into the sphere of communications. And it is in this context that action theory needs to take the blame for this complete failure. It not only lags behind insights, that have been available since the 17th century, revealing that one cannot deduce motives on the basis of the observation of actions, and therefore, cannot deduce the actor[viii] (One need only read the *Preface* to Esprit, 1677). Action theory is not only helpless in view of the complexity of the causal relationships and has to resort to the white lie of unintended consequences. It is not only superseded by attribution theory, which is itself a variant of second-order cybernetics. It must not only take note that - as management consultants today know (see Exner et al.1987 268) – the attribution of effects on people serves to protect latent structures. But above all else, it fails when it comes to focusing on the problems, which we outlined, of steering and control and the need for identity in the light of an uncertain future. Even simple interaction systems, such as meetings and conferences, effectively exclude the possibility of planned determination of actions (see Winograd / Flores 1987 33 ff.). If one wanted to talk about self-steering, one would need to say that it reduces differences of opinion. Yet, it is precisely this that cannot be planned.

Action theory may lend itself to the way that politics is formulated for the public. It provides voters with information that is tailored to suit the simplicity of the situation. It may offer a scientific version for "imitation conflicts", that is, for scapegoat mechanisms in the Giradian sense of the term.[ix] Yes, it may even be helpful if one wants to translate sociological-systems-theoretical analysis into a language that is suitable for politics, that is, if you want to transfer out of second-order cybernetics into first-order cybernetics. No matter how "sharp-wittedly"[x] it may be developed in detail, it cannot contribute to a theory of social or political steering.

A final consideration, which is suggested by more recent developments in systems theory, goes back to the fact that systems consist of operations, that is, of events. In the usual concept of steering one thinks only of changing the *conditions* of future actions, that is, structures, programs, parameters. One should also pay more attention to the *implementation* of these changes, that is, to steering as an *event*. Think of interventions in the financial market, but also of statements of future policy, of the presentation of legislative plans. All of these act as steering events, which themselves act and are intended to act as events. Since the consequences of events act faster than the intended change to the conditions of future action, steering often make steering itself obsolete. In very fast, dynamic systems, oriented towards extremely short-term presents, one must, and perhaps no longer can, prudently change the conditions of future action. At least as an alternative, steering policy then consists increasingly in only sending out and revising signals and observing the structural effects arising from this only as an opportunity for further signals. In the borderline case, one finds oneself in a disco in which sequences of flickering lights and shrill sounds glide over those present who are bored and on the lookout for something else, for further signals to observe.

As a result, these considerations do not in any way lead me to a negative judgment about possibilities of steering. This could be quickly refuted empirically. The problem lies in the conceptual clarification of concepts. When it comes to complex systems, the concept is empty. The subject of steering is not systems, but specific differences (and only a few are suitable). Seen in this way, possibilities for steering may increase in complex systems and may decrease proportionally in relation to innumerable generated and amplified differences. It should also be noted that the reduction of difference is always artificial, while differences normally arise simply because operations are combined with operations. Conceptual clarifications of this kind are a prerequisite for a theory of steering to be applied empirically and practically. Otherwise, one runs the risk of talking about something that does not even exist.

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[i] Contributions to a debate with Fritz W. Scharpf at the Meeting of the Deutschen Vereinigung für Politische Wissenschaft on the 12th September 1988 at Darmstadt. "Politische Steuerung: Ein Diskussionsbeitrag" was published in the *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* , March 1989, Vol. 30, No. 1, pp. 4-9 and recently by Springer On the Jstor platform (https://www.jstor.org/stable/24196506)/.

[ii] For the history, see volumes 7 to 9 of the Centre de Recherche Epistemologie et Autonomie. Paris 1985-1987.

[iii] Translator's note Luhmann refers to a notorious street known at that time for squatting and similar activities. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hafenstraße

[iv] Translator's note: Luhmann uses Desintegration here but this has a different meaning in German from the usual English meaning of "disintegration" i.e. breaking up into small parts.

[v] Translators note: Luhmann refers to Heidegger's account of one's own relationship with one's inner world.
[vi] Le Spleen de Paris V (La Chambre Double) quoted from Oeuvres completes, edited from La Pléiade, Paris 1954 p.287.
[vii] Translators note: Luhmann uses a biblical metaphor here. What he is saying is that that the eye that can see God can see everything including itself and would therefore cease to be an eye. The Same is the case when one applies the idea of steering of everything including the steering. Something needs to be "unsteered".
[viii] Translator's note: What Luhmann is criticizing here are the causal explanations of action theorists, such as George Herbert Mead, Erving Goffman and Talcott Parsons, which claim to be able to link events to specific actions carried out be certain actors (or groups of actors). The claim to be able definitively to deduce or attribute actions in this way, he sees as the misleading and mistaken assumptions of these action theorists. Action theory, according to Luhmann reduces the highly complex nature of social reality to simple formulae of cause and effect.
[ix] The reference here is to analyses of Shakespeare that had not yet been published, especially that of Troilus and Cressida. Translators note: These are now published in Girard (1991), where Girard explains that people desire objects not for their intrinsic value, but because they are desired by someone else-we mime or imitate their desires.
[x] Translators note: Luhmann indulges in a play on words here at the expense of Fritz Scharpf, the leading German political theorist at that time, was due to respond to Luhmann's talk. Scharpf and Scharf (meaning sharp in German), sound almost identical.

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