We Want our War!:
The War that Nobody had Wanted

Wybo Wiersma
s1298577
wybo@logilogi.org

February 6, 2008
Contents

1 Introduction 2

2 Durkheim's Life 3
   2.1 Youth and Background 3
   2.2 Academic Life 4
   2.3 War and Death 4

3 Durkheim’s Concepts and The War 6
   3.1 Dual Consciousness 6
   3.2 Anomie and Suicide 7
   3.3 Collective Effervescence 9

4 Luhmann’s Concepts and The War 11
   4.1 Autopoiesis and Differentiation 11
   4.2 Reduction of Complexity 12
   4.3 Leitdifferenzen 14

5 Conclusion 15
We Want our War!  
Wybo Wiersma

1 Introduction

The First World War was a war as Europe had never seen before. It was fought throughout the continent, and along the Western front alone — a front of trenches that stretched for 80 kilometres — millions were killed. It left Europe broken for much of the early 20th century, and soon was called The Great War, or simply The War. Whole libraries have been written about it, but there always remain some riddles and questions to be debated. One of these issues is that, just before the war broke out, so many people — especially intellectuals and artists — were — each in their own way — very positive about war... How did they come to this? Did they have something to do with The War’s beginning? And were they the spokesmen of a wider, or even a general belligerent mood, or were they just speaking for themselves?

E. Runia, in his ‘Into cleanness leaping: the primacy of the deed in history and literature’ approaches this question by suggesting psychological forces behind the belligerent moods.\textsuperscript{1} He especially brings forward what he calls \textit{Im anfang war die Tat} (the primacy of the deed) and suggests that people plunged into the war to “cut themselves loose from their moorings”\textsuperscript{2} (or even to get back in touch with reality).\textsuperscript{3} It is then suggested that this was swept under the carpet later by the urge of historians — and even entire societies — to come up with reasons for the (shocking) events.\textsuperscript{4} He concludes by positing the \textit{Im anfang war die Tat}-principle as a more general historical factor also.

While very interesting in that it looks at people’s way of thinking for explanations, I do think that it might be valuable too to approach the question from a sociological viewpoint. And as the war came forth from the large, complex, and modern societies of Europe, it is likely that sociological concepts have quite some — if not relatively more — explanatory power on the issue of its beginnings. We will thus attempt to explain the war-fevor of the time before the First World War, and its possible relationship to The War’s beginning, in terms of sociological concepts; the concepts of two great sociologists.

The first is Emile Durkheim, who lived before and during the war. After a short introduction to his life and personal stance towards it, we go into his concepts of dual consciousness, anomie, and collective effervescence, and relate them to the war. His concepts — while still sociological — are most powerful in their descriptions of how individuals experience modern society. They may thus shed light on why some individuals came to view war as a positive thing. In addition to this Niklas Luhmann — our second sociologist — may also give us a glimpse of why, and how such ideas could remain standing, spread and even be held to be rational. This because with his concepts of autopoietic systems, differentiation and \textit{Leitdifferenzen}, he thought in terms of social processes that go their own ways: in their logic entirely separate from the experiences of individuals. Luhmann lived and worked in the second half of the 20th century, and thus also had the advantage of more hindsight on modernity.

\textsuperscript{2}Ibidem 4.
\textsuperscript{3}Ibidem 3-7.
\textsuperscript{4}Ibidem 9-13.
2 Durkheim’s Life

2.1 Youth and Background

Emile Durkheim was born on the 5th of April 1858 in Epinal, Lorraine. He had one brother, and two sisters, and he was his parents’ last child. They only had a modest income, and his father, the Rabbi of the tightly knit Jewish community of Epinal, was an austere, serious, and hard-working person. He held learning in high esteem, and wanted the small Emile to become a rabbi too, like his forefathers had been. At school Emile showed excellent results and he even skipped two classes. But already as a boy he told his parents that he didn’t want to stick to the family tradition of becoming a rabbi.

In 1870, during the Franco-Prussian war, Epinal was occupied by the Germans, and as a 12 year-old Emile silently witnessed their antisemitism. Also in this war large parts of Lorraine were annexed by Germany, making Epinal a French border-town. These experiences, and later news of the Paris Commune of 1971, stimulated Durkheim’s patriotism and made him a defender of the fragile 3rd Republic (versus an always powerful right). Later in life he would become a leftish liberal and even harbor socialist sympathies.

In 1975 Durkheim received his bachelors degrees in letters and science. After this he then went to Paris to prepare for his admission to the Ecole Normale Superieure (ENS). During his year of preparation he experienced many anxieties among what he saw as the indifferent people of this big city. He failed his first admission. Then his father went ill and he failed another time. Only at his third attempt — in 1979 — he was admitted to begin with his studies of Political Philosophy and History. While at the ENS he met the later philosopher Henri Bergson and the future socialist leader Jean Jaurès, and likely because of their influence he finally broke with his Jewish religion.

He was ambivalent about the ENS. He found it too unmethodical and too literary in its approach, but he loved the long working-hours and the intense discussions that were common there. In 1882 he received his agregation and became a philosophy teacher at various Lycees. During this time he worked on his doctoral thesis, which would first be about the relationship between individualism and socialism, then about the individual in society, and later culminated into a first draft of the Division of Labor in Society, and his idea of a science of society.

---

7 Lukes, *Emile Durkheim*, 41.
9 Jones, *Durkheim Reconsidered*, 55.
10 Lukes, *Emile Durkheim*, 42.
12 Lukes, *Emile Durkheim*, 44.
13 Ibidem 45.
2.2 Academic Life

In 1886 he received a scholarship to study the German approach to pedagogy and the social sciences in Berlin and Leipzig. It was there that he came in contact with the social realism of a Volk as a natural unity, and with Wundt’s ideas of social causes.\textsuperscript{15} When he returned to France after a year the papers he had written during his stay had impressed enough people to bring him a lecturing position at Bourdeaux university. He would teach pedagogy, educational history and social sciences there for 15 years, during what was to become one of his most productive periods.\textsuperscript{16}

In 1893 he published his first book: *The Division of Labor in Society*, about the transition from what he called *mechanic solidarity* to *organic solidarity* (more about this in section 3.1).\textsuperscript{17} Again he suffered some anxieties, this time over the bad reviews his book received, and over a chair at the College de France that he just missed. But from then on he would gradually become more self-confident.\textsuperscript{18} In 1897 he presented sociology as a science and a perspective in: *Suicide: A study in Sociology*.\textsuperscript{19} In this book he applied statistical methods to suicide-rates, and induced a sociological view on suicide (its central concept of Anomie is the topic of section 3.2). It was quite successful, both because of its (for the time) rigorous method, and controversial thesis that there could be social causes behind suicide: and thus that society could kill.\textsuperscript{20}

Soon after Durkheim founded L’Anne Sociologique; the first French journal on Sociology. He wrote 25% of its articles by himself, and besides he managed to attract many brilliant students to his research-programme.\textsuperscript{21} Then Durkheim liked to see sociology explicitly introduced into the curriculum, but as university-life was very centralised in France, he had to move to Paris to even stand a chance.\textsuperscript{22} It was thus that he received a chair at the University of Sorbonne in Paris and became a government-advisor on matters of education in 1902.\textsuperscript{23}

Ten years later — in 1912 — he published his third major work: *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. It expounds on the centrality of rituals to society, on the role of collective effervescence in its formation, and on the importance of respect for the rights of the individual in modern society (more about all this in section 3.3). Even then still 3/4th of his teaching-time was devoted on pedagogy and philosophy, instead of sociology, and it was only just before the war that his chair became one in Education and Sociology.\textsuperscript{24}

2.3 War and Death

In 1914, when the German attack began, Parisian intellectuals felt as if a tidal wave was rolling towards the French capital. For Durkheim it was a dreadful time too, until the
first weeks of September, when they were halted in the battle of the Marne.\textsuperscript{25} During the war Durkheim was a moderate patriot who did write two pamphlets for what he termed as the moral maintenance of the country.\textsuperscript{26} The first was about what he saw as the Germans pushing for war in a gamble for pan-germanism, and the second was about their disregard for international relations, and their unbound Nietzschean \textit{will to power}. He clearly thought that the whole German mentality was tending to war.\textsuperscript{27}

Still, regardless of this, Durkheim as a Jew with a German-sounding family-name, was criticised multiple times for his supposed stand to the war; even down to parliament.\textsuperscript{28} But while he was indeed only moderately patriotic, he did what he could and, besides his usual teaching, he also took seat in many war-related commissions, among which one was dedicated to the study and documentation of the war. Moreover he also had a big personal stake in the war, as many of his pupils and colleagues, his son in law, some of his nephews, and his only son Andre (also a promising sociologist) were fighting at the front.

Over time many of them died in the war, and then on the 10th of January Durkheim received notice that his son had went missing during the retreat from Serbia.\textsuperscript{29} Months of agonizing uncertainty followed for Durkheim and his wife, until finally in April Andre was reported dead. This was a severe blow for Durkheim. Not long after it he suffered a stroke, and he died as a broken man on the 15th of November 1917.\textsuperscript{30}

From this description of Durkheim’s life we can thus infer nothing like war-fever, jingoism or even \textit{Im anfang war die Tat}. But we cannot be conclusive as there is only scarce information on Durkheim’s personal views. This because one World War later — in 1943 — the Nazis threw his notes into the street while they were appropriating his daughters house.\textsuperscript{31} We can thus say no more than that it seems that he remained a rationalist, and his views were never much more than moderately patriotic: he saw the war mostly as threat to the 3rd republic, which it was ones duty to defend.

\textsuperscript{25}Lukes, \textit{Emile Durkheim}, 548.
\textsuperscript{26}Emirbayer, \textit{Emile Durkheim}, 8.
\textsuperscript{28}Lukes, \textit{Emile Durkheim}, 557.
\textsuperscript{29}Poggi, \textit{Durkheim}, 5., Lukes, \textit{Emile Durkheim}, 555.
\textsuperscript{30}Lukes, \textit{Emile Durkheim}, 559.
\textsuperscript{31}Pickering, \textit{Durkheim Today}, 9.
3 Durkheim’s Concepts and The War

3.1 Dual Consciousness

One of Durkheim’s first central concepts was that of a dual consciousness. Every human had two consciousnesses, one personal and the other social.\(^{32}\) This latter should not be envisaged as a physical ‘groupmind’, but as similarities between individual minds, induced by communication.\(^{33}\) He also thought that the social half was the better half as it was formed through the intellect, while the personal half was formed by the senses.\(^{34}\) The personal half however was also the base of individuality and individual freedom, and thus valuable in itself.\(^{35}\)

With the increasing division of labor the individual had freed itself.\(^{36}\) Before, in tightly knit, segmentary societies, everyone had had about the same occupation and very similar ideas. Religion and the family figured centrally in these rather primitive societies. Their form of solidarity was what he called mechanic, because of its automatic, unreflective, functioning.\(^{37}\) Then with increased specialization there came to be organic solidarity.\(^{38}\) This was solidarity on the basis of the inter-dependence of the different occupations: an interdependence like that of organs in a body (with the metaphor just as conceptual scaffolding).\(^{39}\) It was more reflexive as it required the moral acknowledgement of inter-dependence.\(^{40}\)

So as societies grew in size people became more free from traditions, and this enabled a regression of the common consciousness. Durkheim found this loosening of the bonds of society to be a good thing, as it was needed for the changes coming with progress to happen. Thus he remarked that the more superficial a *volks-karakter*, the more advanced its society was.\(^{41}\) But society could also change too fast, faster than the receded morality, and in that case the old moral framework would be obsolete and weak, while the new one was not yet there. According to Durkheim the society of his time was in exactly such a pathological state. A state of malfunctioning organic solidarity.\(^{42}\) He saw the battle between labor and capital as one of the signs of this.\(^{43}\)

More specifically he saw a breakdown of moral bonds in the increasing role that

\(^{32}\)Poggi, *Durkheim*, 94.
\(^{36}\)Ibidem 180.
\(^{41}\)Emirbayer, *Emile Durkheim*, 70.
We Want our War! Wybo Wiersma

(laissez faire) markets played in society. And he thought that these bonds could, and needed to be restored by creating guild-like corporations for each occupational group. These could then provide the reflection and self-regulation needed for the restoration of organic solidarity. He deemed this urgent, as he — following the philosopher Renouvier — saw all morality (and even the Kantian categories) as springing from social origins: morality was passed on via the prestige that was associated with certain representations.

In relation to the war it can be said that a situation of outdatedness was also present in the diplomatic, military and political mores of the years preceding it. The rights of war and peace, and the means of communication and contemplation about them, were in the hands of few, — and especially for the Central powers — very few, very conservative people. Thus when the tension rose in advent of the war, they acted swiftly, but from an outdated frame of mind — maybe even knowingly to assert it in the face of their own uncertainty.

Another relationship to the war might be in the fact that many — even Durkheim himself according Steven Lukes — hankered for community. His move from Epinal to the indifferent people of Paris was his own unsettling jump to (a failing) organic solidarity. And as Durkheim already wrote: war could revert it. Then during the august-fever the war did indeed turn the Gesellschaft into a Gemeinschaft again, mending partisan divisions, if even for a short while. This promise of a Renaissance of Community may well have seemed attractive to many urban intellectuals.

3.2 Anomie and Suicide

In his second book Durkheim presented a sociological analysis of suicide. And as already mentioned it caused quite a stir at the time of its appearance. This was because he presented society as a causal factor, suggesting that suicides were not just the choices of individuals, and thus that society could act as a killer. Allbeit in a more nuanced sense than the word kill suggests, this could happen in one of four ways, and along two axis.

First there is the axis of social integration. As already shown in the previous section, the collective consciousness receded with the advance of the division of labor. But now this could also go too far, reducing the individual to his individual consciousness and

45 Pickering, Durkheim Today, 74., Emirbayer, Emile Durkheim, 19.
46 Poggi, Durkheim, 96., Emirbayer, Emile Durkheim, 102.
48 Poggi, Durkheim, 148., Stromberg, Redemption by War, 189.
49 Lukes, Emile Durkheim, 554.
51 Stromberg, Redemption by War, 192.
52 Poggi, Durkheim, 65.
robbing him from his transcendental reasons for existence.\textsuperscript{54} This individual — as the master of his own existence — could then easily be brought to suicide by the slightest personal setback.\textsuperscript{55} This was what Durkheim called egoistic suicide. On the other end he found altruistic suicide: here the basis for existence is so far outside the individual that he is (too) willing to sacrifice himself for society.\textsuperscript{56} This is what we see in elder nomads killing themselves in order to be no burden, and in soldiers joining a hopeless battle.\textsuperscript{57}

The second axis is that of social regulation. Too little social regulation would produce what he called anomie. Anomie is frustration caused by a state of normlessness.\textsuperscript{58} This happens because the individual is left to his own infinite wishes when the norms regulating his needs lose power.\textsuperscript{59} In this humans are different from animals whose appetites are naturally limited: we humans need the greater authority of society for this according to Durkheim.\textsuperscript{60} On the other end of this axis we find fatalism. And as expected we find fatalistic suicides in strictly regulated, primitive societies, and in the army again (this time mostly during peace-time, and caused by its strict discipline).\textsuperscript{61}

Durkheim found anomie and egoism to be typical of modern society. Where first religion had provided meaning, and guilds regulation, now, with increased mobility, migration and industrialization, especially intellectuals and business people faced egoism and anomie.\textsuperscript{62} In times of crisis, or when confronted with quick growth or success — but also more in general — morality did not have the time to catch up with social changes, and before it could, people had committed suicide already.\textsuperscript{63} As symptoms of anomie he saw impatience with remaining restraints, restlessness, instability, and susceptibility to whims and impulses.\textsuperscript{64}

When we translate the concepts of anomie and egoism to the war, we can see that much of Europe, and especially Germany, had experienced unsettling growth, urbanisation and industrialisation in the years just prior to the war.\textsuperscript{65} And with its superb educational system and good universities, Germany certainly housed many intellectuals.\textsuperscript{66} The war may thus well have been attractive as one of their anomie whims. And Kaiser Wilhelm II’s instability and his almost boundless aspirations can also be fitted with the profile of anomie. Durkheim himself — maybe not wholly objectively — described the Nietzschean ‘will to power’ as the German unbound will in the act of ignoring all international constraints.

\textsuperscript{54}Poggi, \textit{Durkheim}, 79.
\textsuperscript{56}Durkheim, \textit{Suicide}, 14-15, 219-223, 258.
\textsuperscript{57}Ibidem 43.
\textsuperscript{58}Emirbayer, \textit{Emile Durkheim}, 47.
\textsuperscript{59}Ibidem 206-211.
\textsuperscript{60}Durkheim, \textit{Suicide}, 228., Emirbayer, \textit{Emile Durkheim}, 201-202.
\textsuperscript{65}Modris Eksteins, \textit{Rites of Spring} (Boston 1989) 69.
\textsuperscript{66}Ibidem 71.
But on the other sides of the two axis — those of fatalism and altruism — a point can be made too. As the youth and the underdogs of — again especially Germany — experienced their society as oppressive, and ignorant to their needs.\textsuperscript{67} They: Wander-vogel and socialists, each in their own way, hoped to see their ideal society brought about by the destruction of the old through the war.\textsuperscript{68} And contrary to this fatalism of again mostly intellectuals, the great masses of European and German society were still very much socialized into believing that it was their good duty to die for their country. They were only one step away from altruistic suicide.

### 3.3 Collective Effervescence

Another important concept that Durkheim brought forth, is that of collective effervescence. He derived it from his studies of totemist rituals, and described it in \textit{The Elementary forms of Religious Life}. Before such rituals commence the tribe comes together from far and away, increasing their interactions as a first step. Then with the beginning of the ritual they focus on their totem animal and build their arousal. And finally, by mirroring and inducing each other, their animated emotions continue to increase and reach their summit in true collective effervescence.\textsuperscript{69} Through this they create the other state of being (the religious world) for each other, while — because of their focus on the totem — they think it is brought forth by the totem animal, and not by themselves.

What they really worship in the totem, is heir own social energy. Thus the social creates the religious experience, and the sacred/profane distinction.\textsuperscript{70} In this way society is God for Durkheim, also because in relation to the individual, society is: superior, all-powerful, authoritative, and its creator and socializer.\textsuperscript{71} And not just that: like Gods, society needs respect and personal sacrifices too.\textsuperscript{72} The fate of the totem and the tribe are thus entwined.\textsuperscript{73} In this same sense the flag was to the societies of Durkeims own day, what the totem was to the tribe: a symbol for its collective consciousness.\textsuperscript{74}

And where in modern societies the flag was its symbol, the state was its embodiment and its more concentrated form. The primary function of the state was reflection and control: Durkheim saw it as the brain of the social organism.\textsuperscript{75} Its most important power was that of war and peace. And its actions should serve two aims. The first was the protection of the collective consciousness. The state could do this inwardly through the penal system, and outwardly through war.\textsuperscript{76} The state also had a place in the collective consciousness through the cult of the nation (nationalism). The second aim of the state was the protection of the individual.\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{67} Stromberg, \textit{Redeption by War}, 188.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibidem 111-112, 141, 276.
\textsuperscript{72} Poggi, \textit{Durkheim}, 162.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibidem 152.
\textsuperscript{74} Emirbayer, \textit{Emile Durkheim}, 112.
\textsuperscript{77} Emirbayer, \textit{Emile Durkheim}, 18.
And it was in the decades before the war that this latter aim gained importance as more personal freedom became necessary for the progress of society. It also rose to immanence because the receding collective consciousness left people with no similarity but their being humans. Thus in what Durkheim called the cult of the individual, man increasingly became the object of a sacred respect (humanism). In the light of this cult war had become the supreme evil, as it forced the divine individual into servitude again, almost like Jesus in Christianity: a servant-God.

Relating collective effervescence to the war, some intellectuals and artists, while looking for the sublime reality, might have willingly shed their civilian values to take a dive into the cleansing collective effervescence of the Great War. Especially among artists and intellectuals this approach to the war does not seem to have been that rare. But on the other hand, besides things like the war as a wild adventure, there is much more on duty, sacrifice and fear in the general literature. So — while there might have been something to this end — it is likely to have been confined to the minority of urban intellectuals.

Still, the greater masses may have been carried by collective effervescence in the massive gatherings around their totem-flags. In Germany we see this happening even just before the war: In June — while the Kaiser and his ministers were still awaiting the response of the Serbs — a jubilant pro-war demonstration took place in Berlin: national anthems were sang in the streets, accompanied by dancing and drinking. But again we should not overestimate the influence of this demonstration as it (only) attracted twenty thousand men, while earlier ones (for purposes like universal suffrage) had attracted hundreds of thousands. So collective effervescence only really kicked in when the war had already been declared and soldiers gathered for transport to the battlefield. It can at most be considered a necessary cause, instead of a sufficient one.

---

78 Emirbayer, Emile Durkheim, 179., Thompson, Emile Durkheim, 44.
79 Emirbayer, Emile Durkheim, 277.
81 Emirbayer, Emile Durkheim, 178.
83 Stromberg, Redemption by War, 30, 38., Eksteins, Rites of Spring, 133, 179., Wohl, The Generation of 1914, 51.
84 Stromberg, Redemption by War, 133.
4 Luhmann’s Concepts and The War

4.1 Autopoiesis and Differentiation

The second sociologist whose concepts we examine in relation to the beginnings of the war is the late 20th century German Niklas Luhmann. As already noted in the introduction he thought in terms of social processes that function according to their own logic. In that sense Luhmann can be called a more sociological sociologist than Durkheim as his concepts still placed most of their effects in pathologies induced in individuals, while Durkheim posits a sociological reality. We can make this difference with Durkheim clear by juxtaposing Luhmann’s concept of the autopoietic meaning-system to that of dual consciousness, and in the process we will explain this fruitful concept and relate it to the development and influence of pro-war ideas just before war.

Luhmann’s most important concept is that of the autopoietic meaning-system. Autopoietic meaning-systems are systems that reproduce themselves and that are closed in that their own structure determines what they hold as meaningful. They are only open in the sense that they can be structurally coupled to their environment. This structural coupling can be seen as a relationship of emergence (like how a mind emerges from a brain). Now in the relationship of an individual to society Luhmann does not imagine a consciousness with a socialized and a private part, but he pictures two autopoietic systems instead (a social system and a consciousness). These systems are then only structurally coupled by what we experience as language, while remaining two totally different systems: as different as a cell from the minerals that it is made of.

Because of this model, Luhmann did not see a single receding social sphere, but he saw it differentiate into multiple, separate social systems. Where in segmentary societies people had done the same work and shared the same purposes and thoughts, this changed with hierarchical societies: tasks were divided, while purposes and ways of thinking were still similar. And in the 17th century class-societies appeared in which experienced interests started to diverge too. Then in the late 19th century — with further specialization and the growth of universities — after tasks and interests, the whole way of thinking, or in other words — reason itself — started to diverge. And this division of reason had been what Durkheim — on the moral plane — experienced as the failing of organic solidarity.

The differentiation of social systems meant that individuals — instead of being released from social influences by modernity — were socialized into multiple different social systems, each with their own social codes. To phrase it in analytical terms: it

---

89 Here it is suggested that Durkheim also thought in terms of multiple collective consciousness in one state, but it seems unlikely to me, given how he operationalizes it in most contexts. Jones, *Durkheim Reconsidered*, 98.
can be seen as a move from Logic to Presuppositional Logic for individuals, where increasingly different presuppositions are provided by each social system, leading to inconsistencies between them. Back at the sociological level this resulted in social systems no longer being in touch with each other. Luhmann acknowledged that this was problematic and could cause what he called steering-problems, but unlike Durkheim he did not believe that there was a viable way to fix it.91

When we relate this back to the war we see that the political, and especially the diplomatic and military structures of before the war were not only outdated, but also — because of having branched away from other systems in the modern, differentiated, society — had lost contact with the rest of society. And while it is true that it has happened before that people misjudged some changes in society and technology, the extent to which in this case even the military had lost contact with the technical and industrial realities that would determine the war, was beyond normal.92 No one had expected it to become a war of trenches due to the defensive power of the machine gun, and all still thought in terms of quick, decisive battles, instead of exhausting each others human- and financial reserves, to name a few...93

This whole process of out-of-contact thinking, or thinking on a stage already set, has also been extensively described by philosophers. In its most basic form it was prepared by Wittgenstein II, when he said that language receives its meaning only from its use in communities (life forms).94 After him Thomas Kuhn made (more or less) clear how paradigms frame thinking and perception, and shield it from discontinuities and anomalies.95 And then the historian Michel Foucault described the structural power of discourses on our thinking.96 These are forces that operate on a sociological level, and on that level the war has been made possible by what we could call the discourses of secluded diplomats and nationalistic politicians.

4.2 Reduction of Complexity

A second important concept of Luhmann is that of meaning as a reduction of complexity. That is; meaning is having attention for some, while ignoring other aspects.97 And it is through directing the attention of individuals by inducing them to make the distinctions that the system makes, that social systems provide meaning to individuals.98 Social systems exist in communication, and replicate themselves through it, not through the reflection of individuals.99 One aspect of this is that meaning does thus not refer

---

95 Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago 1996) x, 1, 37, 126, 111-114.
97 Blom, *Complexiteit en Contingentie*, 76, 94.
98 Ibidem 176-178.
to things in themselves but is created and recreated by autopoietic social systems.\textsuperscript{100} Another is that these meaning-systems — as closed systems — are only capable of (structural) adaptation to their environment through evolution.\textsuperscript{101}

This evolution should not be mistaken for evolution at the biological level, as their evolution happens on a social level; more successful systems gain more status and through that more adherents. This evolution is essentially blind, in that it does not lead to structural changes as long as these systems are not put to the test.\textsuperscript{102} And besides being blind, it also happens out of the sight of participating individuals, as they are immersed in the meaning provided by these systems, and thus cannot really question them. Only some sociologists (and to some extent historians and philosophers) study these systems (each from their respective systems), and it thus was only quite recently that modernity discovered the diversity of her social systems in what Luhmann called the enlightenment of the Enlightenment.\textsuperscript{103}

Yet this attention for the influence of social systems does not mean a denial of individual actors (and their psychological states).\textsuperscript{104} We can namely think at least three levels of causation in the domain of human actions. First there are emotions. Then there is the domain of explicable reason. And third are discourses and social systems. They provide the concepts and values that reason and cultured intuitions are shaped by. But besides this they also behave according to a logic of their own. And it is that level which we explore with Luhmann here. Individuals can thus still be rational actors (on their own level), but their mode of reasoning is provided by their cultural or historical background (on another level): a bit like how a fish in a fishbowl can still swim.\textsuperscript{105}

And we humans do really need these ‘fishbowls of meaning’ to maintain a minimum sense of meaning and control (against anomie), and even simply because any form of rationality requires a minimum standard of clarity.\textsuperscript{106} What E. Runia terms narrative gravity among historians, could just be this hankering for simplicity.\textsuperscript{107} And on a more mundane level we might also see continuity in most historic texts because it makes the narratives easier to remember (to think, etc...), just like how rhyme makes a ballad easier to recite.

When we look for problems with complexity in the decades just before the war, we not only stumble upon the crisis of Historism (about cultural relativity), and a crisis in physics (Einstein’s Relativity), but we can also find many complaints of empty science and fin de siecle relativism and aimlessness.\textsuperscript{108} And in response to this apparent craving for meaning among intellectuals we see many of them cling to isms like socialism,
nationalism and even catholicism — almost like current-day fundamentalists. And just like Kuhns paradigm-switches, the choices between these meaning-systems could not be rationally grounded; they were plunges into the deep.

Furthermore, in line with this clinging to isms, most intellectuals of before the war can be seen as mainly first order observers (not seeing themselves as having viewpoints). They still believed in big stories like those sworn off by Jean-Francois Lyotard. In terms of Durkheim’s idea of morality lagging behind: the protection of the state and respect for the individual were (allbeit conflicting) norms in most of Europe at the time of the war, while the norm of being skeptical towards big stories had not spread widely among intellectuals yet. This made nationalists — and those who gestalt-switched to a pro-war stance from, or within other isms, when war came near — even more susceptible to being led to battle by a social system leaning towards war.

4.3 Leitdifferenzen

Our final Luhmanian concept is that of the Leitdifferenz. A Leitdifferenz is something that takes the place of “good” and “bad” in a social system. Examples are true/false in science, beautiful/ugly in art, powerful/weak in politics, and profit/loss in business. These Leitdifferenzen almost function like totems: people see the world in terms of it by focussing on it. And almost like the collectively effervescent tribe (but slower and on the rational plane) they influence and skew each others’ thinking towards it through communication (an effect sometimes called “groupthink”). This, together with competition, creates a tendency to extremity along the Leitdifferenz: when for example a manager cares more about scientific truth, than about profit, he is likely to be driven out of business by competing managers that do care about profit, regardless of what he does or says otherwise (this effectively is the steering-problem).

Now it seems clear that the war was decided upon by small groups of diplomats and politicians who were not well informed and have made some very poor decisions (even by their own standards). But there is more to this: there is a pattern in their blunders and in those of other groups like artists and intellectuals — who, after them, were most gripped by the war. Not only were their different bellicose ideologies incoherent with eachother — as we would expect to happen after a division of reason —, but they were also each skewed along their Leitdifferenz in their thinking about the war.

First there’s the military and the diplomats. In Austria, Germany and Russia (one of these is usually blamed for the war) small, homogeneous coteries from the higher aristocracy decided on war and peace. They — especially their emperors — hardly

\[\text{References}
109\text{ Stromberg, Redemption by War, 21-26, 71.}
110\text{ Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 152, 170.}
111\text{ Jean-Francois Lyotard, La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir (Paris 1979).}
112\text{ Stromberg, Redemption by War, 5, 183.}
113\text{ Blom, Complexiteit en Contingentie, 240-242.}
114\text{ Luhmann, ‘Globalization or World Society?, 1-12., Blom, Complexiteit en Contingentie, 260.}
115\text{ Hamilton and Herwig, The Origins of World War I, 11-12, 28, 43, 451-453, 469.}
116\text{ Stromberg, Redemption by War, 5, Eksteins, Rites of Spring, 92.}
117\text{ Lederer, ‘On the Sociology of World War?, 266., Blom, Complexiteit en Contingentie, 266.}
118\text{ Stromberg, Redemption by War, 181., Pickering, Durkheim Today, 75., Hamilton and Herwig, The Origins
We Want our War!  
Wybo Wiersma

faced any reality-checks, and their thinking was thus — along their *Leitdifferenz* — only in terms of the status and power of their nations (their reality). Austria was afraid to become the sick man of Europe after Turkey if they did not punish the Serbs, Germany wanted a place under the sun among the colonial powers (while colonies were not profitable and mainly a status symbol), and Russia had just been humiliatingly defeated by Japan in 1905. And while these coteries did contemplate defeat, they again only saw it in terms of the decline of their nation. And that was something which would happen anyway if their nation lost status by backing away. Thus they were blind to the humane and economic disasters that the war would bring in any case.

Then there’s the artists with their ode to speed-machines and heroic death. Foremost among them was Filippo T. Marinetti with his Futurism, in which he declared war on everything traditional: “glorify war - the only hygiene of the world”. He might have been serious, but then serious as an artist. Art had slowly become independent since the later Middle-ages, when it started to diverge from the meaning-system of the Church. Only some half a century before the war it had completely freed itself from main stream morality in *l’art pour l’art*. And only then did it become capable of seeing reality as an aesthetic dream (with its own code of the new, the creative). A dream that has possibly led quite some artists to volunteer for the war. But when they awoke they found themselves in a nightmare of formless, muddy trenches, subjected to a roaming and anonymous death.

And third there’s the group of (urban) intellectuals. Among them were people as diverse as Wandervogel, scientists (like Durkheim’s son), and members of lower aristocracy. Many of them may have been looking for community and fresh camp-life; for reality and simple physical truths, as the sources suggest: They described the war — sometimes half serous — in the discourses of tourism and sports: “come and die, it will be fun”. But when — wary of over-specialization and endless airy talk — they arrived at their destination: reality; they found no good simple folk and sniffing horses in the morning-light. They found the stupid, meaningless brutality of a draining war, lasting for years.

Thus many politicians, artists and intellectuals were lured to war by the *Leitdifferenzen* of their respective function systems. They made war seem like a good thing — read a mighty, beautiful, respectively a true thing —, and went for it with the best of intentions — read the pursuit of power, beauty, or reality.

But we should not over-estimate their number, as artists and volunteering nobility

---

120 Hamilton and Herwig, *The Origins of World War I*, 27, 443-446.
We Want our War!
Wybo Wiersma

are usually taken to be the generation of 1914, while they were only a small minority, among which the most verbose were an even smaller minority of writers.\textsuperscript{126} The beginnings of the war will thus largely remain an affair of the politicians and the diplomats: their function-system was most decisive. Moreover we should be extra careful not to overestimate the influence of the intellectuals, as they, by being much nearer to our own function system — that of the coterie of (meta-)historians — are likely find more resonance and understanding among us than is their due in relation to the beginnings of the war. The great masses (and probably many intellectuals and artists too) were still led into the war by a sense of duty.

5 Conclusion

Our attempt to explain the beginnings of The War in terms of sociological concepts seems to be at least tentatively successful. We found an instance of Durkheim’s idea of norms falling behind on society in the outdatedness of the diplomatic and political mores of the time. And with Luhmann’s idea of social differentiation we can explain why these coteries — whose actions led directly to the war — had lost contact with the rest of society, and were led astray by their discourses.

Also we saw how differentiation could instill a craving for community that could make war seem attractive. And how anomie — by confusing the will — could lead many, among whom Kaizer Wilhelm II, to ignore international constraints, and take a plunge into the war.\textsuperscript{127} More generally the need for a reduction of complexity may have been behind what we saw as a craving for the real and the simple life. But we should keep in mind that this most likely only applied to (urban) intellectuals as they were the ones who started to cling to various isms that promised to take over the role of religion in reducing the complexities of life. And because of this adherence to isms — and their gestalt-switching to belligerent nationalism when the war came near — their views on what a war would bring, were skewed along each of their letdifferenzes.\textsuperscript{128}

And where essentially blind social systems had previously managed to adapt reasonably well through evolution in small steps, now — because of the grand scale of the war — these systems only had one chance to die or to survive in the cataclysmic test of spirits that this war essentially was. Liberalism rose from the battered trenches. But only after a Second World War, and almost a Third, did its norm of skepticism towards big stories gain a foothold in most of Europe.

This norm however is in no way likely to be enough to bring an end to the history of social systems stumbling and jumping into the abyss. We all know of growing fundamentalism in the Middle East, but what about the many Asian nations that are currently facing even faster industrialisation than Germany did just before the war? What if they face anomie or start groping for meaning? How immensely more remote from human understanding would a World War currently be, when it will be fought

\textsuperscript{126}Stromberg, Redemption by War, 36., Hamilton and Herwig, The Origins of World War I, 474., Wohl, The Generation of 1914, 5, 18, 39, 114.

\textsuperscript{127}Hamilton and Herwig, The Origins of World War I, 80.

with nuclear weapons?

And keeping things to ourselves: in what ways are we misled by the blind-spots of our own social systems, both as meta-historians and as members of an even more complex society? There is no reason we would be exempt, even if we are skeptics, as with the ever increasing complexity of society, even the skeptic has to make its assumptions; has to take it’s jumps. Could for example our society currently be economistic, instead of nationalistic, and thus be essentially blind to things like Global Warming and the depletion of natural resources?

The last thing has certainly not yet been said about the First World War, but the same is true for the role of social systems in the development of historical events. What we may conclude for now is that societies most likely can kill indeed: social systems can even make wars seem attractive that in the end will span continents and cost the lives of millions...
References


Blom, Christiaan, *Complexiteit en Contingentie: een kritische inleiding tot de sociologie van Niklas Luhmann* (Kampen 1997).


— *The Division of Labor in Society* (New York 1933).


Herbert, Christopher, *Culture and Anomie* (Chicago 1991).


Stromberg, Roland, *Redemption by War: The Intellectuals and 1914* (Lawrence KA 1982).