

Dissertation Outline

Self-reference in the Latvian cultural paradigm

I. Theoretical Background

This dissertation considers the Latvian cultural paradigm that is based on an identification with peasants and rural life and analyzes the paradigmatic change that occurs as society's self-reference points change. The formation, coordination, and acceptance of society's self-reference is an important resource in periods of social change. N. Luhmann system theory suggests that in our functionally differentiated society today it is increasingly difficult to agree and adopt a self-reference, as lives become more differentiated and complex. In addition, a common centre, which had the role of the observer, disappears. Traditionally, society has turned to urban intellectuals as the agents of self-reference in constructing an image of itself. (Luhmann, 1999). N. Luhmann's theory includes questions of consciousness because individuals form the foundation of society, and individual psychological characteristics form society's collective consciousness.

Our functionally differentiated society today has lost this traditional way of forming a self-reference and precisely this situation is significant, when applied to the formation and preservation of the Latvian cultural paradigm. The more complex societal structures become, the less possible it is to offer the self-reference "we--a peasant culture" as representative of society as a whole. "We--peasants" may be used in social discourse and is preserved in individual consciousness, but it is connected to traditional images that society has had of itself and is a conservative self-image. It is important that today the formation of Latvia's culture is based not on similarities with the past, but rather on differences from the past in order to gain insight and understanding into what society has become and what are the differences between past and present self-references. Each self-description found in society helps to shape a segment of this self-reference and it is a never-ending process. N. Luhmann's system theory on society as a self-reference system requires the following conditions: 1) society observes itself, taking into consideration the differences between society as a system and its environment. When Latvian self-reference formed, the main differences between them and others in their surroundings was that they were primarily peasants; 2) self-reference is formed asymmetrically, as a phenomenon of urban life. Today the agents of self-reference formation exhibit this condition, as they preserve the traditional cultural self-reference, which, however, does not reflect today's differentiated society; 3) Latvian cultural self-reference today exhibits a blind spot of society as a system because it is impossible to find a common self-reference point in this diverse society. For this reason "we--a nation of peasants" is recreated as a key to the social system.

1.1. System theory

In systems theory there are three different forms of self-reference, which fall into the following categories:

1) basic self-reference, where the fundamental difference is between the entity and relationship. The basic self-reference describes itself as an entity, for example, as an event or a social system, a form of communication. The basic self-reference is a minimal self-reference, but without which *autopoietic* reproduction in a temporalized system would not be possible. The foundation in self-reference is a significant demand for a self-reference system, but it is not a system reference. The Latvian self-reference "we--a peasant nation" in the nineteenth century corresponded to the social standing of Latvian society and with this self-identification came also the basic self-reference.

2) process of self-reference is a reflexivity that determines the essential difference between before and after. A process develops in accord with this clarification of before/after if what expected occurs. For example, communication provides conditions for process development, where simple events have expected reactions and reactions to the expectations. This means that self-descriptive operations strive to become a part of a certain process, which is a communication for the communicative process (communication about communication), observation becomes observing a process (observation of an observation). In this meaning reflection develops and the future process becomes more intense. If process self-reference is applied to the period between the 1920s and 1940s, the reflexivity of the social textual space grows, but it still describes the same peasant (historian's, economist's, literary) narrative. Independent Latvia as agricultural is distinguished from Latvia before and after interwar independence as industrial.

3) reflections, where the basic difference is between the system and its environment. Self-references are able to describe the system reference only through reflection. The system distinguishes itself from its environment through the action of self-references. Self-references may not be accepted by the system if their purpose is self, rather than systemic, understanding. (Luhmann, 1999: 443-444.) Continued reference to a peasant society is applied to society as a whole. This same self-reference continues to be applied to Latvia in the 20th and 21st centuries because the Soviet industrialization period produces references that are not capable of being understood. In the new social, political, and economic situation after the renewal of Latvia's independence in 1991, the system communicates how it understands itself: as a nation of peasants.

The members of society communicate to each other *about themselves*, which in turn contributes to self-observations that are recorded in printed texts and are disseminated. These self-observations gain support and are coordinated as individual members of society come to agree on these self-observations. These observations are passed from one generation to another and are preserved as a component of self-description. Through communication, self-description becomes self-reference (thus becoming a paradigm)--a way in which society describes itself and what it is. From this distinct actions, metal structures, determined behavioral norms and practices, values emerge and shape society's *autopoiesis*. System theory structures this development in the following manner: self-reference--dissemination--time--action. The dissemination of self-reference in system theory is called *interpenetration*, which describes the complexity and interaction between individuals in society. The increase of complexity becomes action. In systems theory self-reference sets a border, whose opening or expansions illustrates a society's openness and readiness for dynamic changes. Self-reference in society is what it is currently and also simultaneously what it has not yet become. For this reason a society's evaluation of itself as it distinguishes itself from its surroundings is a means through which society can realize itself.

1.2.

M. Archer's research draws a line between structure (or culture) and action. In the analysis of structure and action it is important to observe temporal aspects. If the action produces structure, then the structure is also influenced by the next action (Archer, 1988). Social structure depends on action as well as on how the individuals participating in the action understand it. It is most important to analyze the reproduction and transformation of social structure rather than the structure itself.

In analyzing individuals' self-references one must consider that the individuals participating in the process may or may not be aware of their social position and relationships to others (*Bhaskar*, 1979: 26). System theorists describe this as the "blindness" of cultural participants. Bhasker recognizes that there are structures that exist independent of the participant's cognition of them. This means therefore that the researcher must be aware that the existence of a structure does not always depend on a realization of, or interpretation of, its essence. The individual may live in accord with values of society without realizing that these are a product of his or her socialization and education. The individual incorporates self-reference into his or her narrative as an accepted way of understanding and reading the world while at the same time this individual does not see the differences shaped by the new economic situation. (*Gidenss*, 1999: 35). M. Archer uses the metaphor: the seams of a garment (*Archer*, 1999: 168) to illustrate how narratives weave through generations.

This dissertation builds on the idea of "seams of a garment" in its analysis of Latvian narratives in the twentieth century. Narratives and the self-references created by these narratives are analyzed as the seams of Latvian culture, which focus on the self-image "we are peasants". This research seeks to understand why individuals continue to refer to these "seams" (narratives) to describe themselves and their society.

Narratives not only reproduce social action, but also shape psychological traditions or mentalities. Stories (narratives) heard in childhood can influence the life choices an individual makes as well as his or her personal self-reference. This study builds on the methodologies of M. Archer, R. Bhaskar, and E. Gidens works, who employ analyses of narrative, collective memory, and social myths to outline social context and environment and to understand these as resources for society that appear in self-reference.

1.3

The concept of *identity* in this study is used to denote the coordination of an individual's or society's imagined representation, if it is incorporated into the self-reference. The author of this study bases her analysis on the assumption that self-reference is more important than identity because identity changes as soon as self-reference changes. Self-reference is shaped from society's observations about itself, which can be studied as narratives. The narrative is not neutral because the way in which it is presented expresses memories that are linked to the expectation that something is still possible, or it is desirable that something is repeated. The narrative can call up directly a desire in the listener to continue this narrative as a value that has been tried and experienced in previous generations. The narratives that reveal the most are the so-called "bad" narratives, and, moreover, it is difficult to think of a narrative without the aspect of moralizing (*Mink*, 1981:234). The society's narrative of communication is coordinated with one of the references that shape the nation's feeling of unity, that "*we are peasants because all Latvians are originally from there*". Society reproduces not only this narrative, but also repeats certain norms and values in actions, and mentally recreates itself as a peasant society, that is a society, where the self-reference was peasant culture.

Self-reference as cultural identity

In the beginning of the 20th century, self-reference found in literature primarily preserved the values of peasant life, without considering signs of modernism and urbanism found in society. In the 1920s to 1940s, while preserving the peasant paradigm, even the work of emigré authors was marked by irony regarding the self-reference "we- a peasant nation." The reference agents (authors) exhibit a second level of observation about the first observer and denote a possible opening of the self-reference (A. Eglītis, G. Janovskis). Literature as a text (narrative) fills the reference with arguments and becomes reality, which later in self-reference is interpreted as reality. Latvian

educational code recreates not only the peasant's world and mentality. Literature also as an important space for communication primarily reflects the mentality of a loser and victim, in which the individual is not given heroic narratives to overcome the situation. Literature directly shapes through feelings, themes, and actions passive self-references.

Self-reference Agents

Society's self-reference is shaped asymmetrically. It is shaped by the view of urban intellectuals of society. The rest of society either accepts this view or not, and therefore interviews with the creators of self-reference present the opportunity to trace the circle of society's communication. The expressers of self-reference are a culture's self-reference agents, who usually are recognized authorities in society.

Self-reference agents express their observations (including those they have incorporated from "marginalized" observers) in public communication spaces--newspapers, public speeches--and with their authority and influence they encourage the transformation of society's self-description into society's self-reference.

This study includes several interviews with representatives of this reference agent group, or representatives of the Latvian intelligentsia: I. Ziedonis and G. Ķeniņš-Kings. This study analyzes G. Ķeniņš-Kings's book as a reference that is a contemporary economist's *story*. (2.3.6). By contrast, the cultural references presented by I. Ziedons, scholar J. Stradiņš, and Prof. I. Lancmanis are analyzed with them in their interviews and reveal the authors' personal experiences as trends in repeating the cultural paradigm. Prof. A. Villeruša volunteered to give an interview precisely because she wanted to share her experiences she had on a farm and how, consequently, she sees, understands, and values the processes in her family members lives. Her interview concludes the study's empirical component because she confirms the hypothesis on narrative's influence on an individual's actions, lifestyle, and values. Her experience reflects Latvian culture's self-reference, where an individual can in fact be in any profession, but rural life and farm work is an integral part of Latvian life.

The Results of Communication

Interviews with cultural reference agents, about their personal tendencies, experiences, and views, which also are based on recognizable stereotypes found in society's views on itself -that Latvians are peasants because all Latvians are originally from rural areas--confirm the thesis about the

emotional experience the individual absorbs from socialization that stresses the rural aspect. In addition to referring to this self-reference, the interviewees also note 1) that this has been incorporated by the views of Baltic Germans; 2) nineteenth-century national movement activists created this image 3) this expresses a feeling of being threatened because the city is a cosmopolitan, non-Latvian limited urban environment where the Latvian feels mentally imprisoned 4) the significance of cultural texts, especially *Straumēni* 5) the significance of childhood experiences in the country.

In contemporary society, these ideas are linked to today's rural lifestyle--work in the city and a home in the country.

The Study

In contemporary societal communication, using also modern media, Latvian identity is still associated primarily with the country. Life in the country is not only to be a peasant or farmer, but to be Latvian and to represent the Latvian *way of life*. Urban intellectuals continue to identify with rural farm life. One can even find in social communication expressions such as that the city is detrimental for Latvian culture (Latvianness) and for national unity, which is perceived to exist in the country. Globalization has spurred references to the stability of peasant life and the intention to preserve characteristic Latvian traditions and to decrease potential risks. Thus, that difference members of society all use the self-reference "we - peasants" provides evidence of a high level of coordination.

In the interviews described in the dissertation, reference agents search for the reason for their personal characteristics and relationship with self-reference that has been shaped as a result of their own experience, characteristics, or beliefs. The reference is always the result of choices made. For this reason, the study focuses on the situations and arguments the reference agents mention in their observations of cultural self-reference and their own identification with it.

In the empirical section of the dissertation, the interviews are analyzed in the context of this study's hypothesis, that social action and an individual's self-reference is influenced by cultural narratives, collective memories, education, and socialization. The interviews were structured in order to gain insight into how society's self-references influence an individual's values and actions, and vice versa, how an individual's experience changes his or her self-reference to see themselves as peasants. The study focuses on individual's history, lifeworld in which cultural narratives and social myths are revealed.

2.2 Methodology

Qualitative methods enable one to gain insight into an individual's motivations, views, impressions, and thoughts about life as well as to hear how a culture's self-reference influences the motivation of an action. This means allowing individuals themselves to talk about the changes in social life practices and experiences and how they see not only themselves but also how they fit into society and understand these social processes. The method used to reveal these complexities is *triangulation* (Silverman, 1993: 156, Shipman, 1997:105). Social science researches use this methodology to denote independent sources of information and to understand what is known or partially known. This method is used in interviewing individuals who have made major life changes to understand their motivation for this change.

The dissertation uses in-depth interviews with respondents who left their work and life in the city and became farmers/country dwellers to discover what kind of value system motivated them and what role cultural narratives had in this process. Comparative methodology is used in the analysis of interviews because the material acquired is analyzed in accord with theoretical conceptions (Ragin, 1994: 85). Time is measured based on system theory which states that *temporality in self-reference is flexible, with vague understanding of the present* (Luhmann, 1999: 348-349.)

Respondents

The dissertation analyzes twenty in-depth interviews: 15 respondents and 5 reference agents. The respondents were a diverse group, including those with higher education backgrounds--university professor, lawyer, artists, journalist, engineers, pedagogue, athletic trainer; with technical educations--produce buyer, electrotechnician, locksmith, seamstress. The interviews with reference agents are analyzed separately in chapter 4.

The respondents' interviews were divided into two categories: 1) interview-life story with those who responded to a newspaper announcement and 2) "economically active" group, that is active farmers, who left urban professions to work on a farm.

Respondents, whose interviews became life stories, volunteered and admitted from the beginning that they had waited for such a moment to share their life's experience.

2.2. Data analysis and Interpretation

In the analysis the first group of interviews (interview-life story), several significant themes emerge: 1) that a Latvian feels free in the country. The theme of freedom is tied to the historical archetype of

Latvia's freedom denied 2) the story of one's ancestors and history inspires the renewal of one's country home and this heritage is an important component of Latvia's renewal; 3) the country provides a clean, chemical-free environment 4) the country is characterized by harmonious relationships and reflect the peace of Latvian folk songs and Ed. Virzas *Straumēni* 5) the image of strong women as the head of the country home and is in accord with traditional gender roles. This group of respondents reflects the reference agents' idea about the Latvian farm as a model for universal harmony. The reference has developed, influenced by cultural and family narratives, which has also been enriched by personal experiences.

The following references to the country are given in contrast to the city: 1) reference to the city as an unfriendly environment for Latvians 2) at a certain age Latvians try to acquire a country home even if he or she will not farm because they are "genetically a peasant." The interviews stress special relationship to nature, which are further "mythologized" in stories of auras, the responsibility toward nature as a free of chemicals.

The adaptation of urbanites to the country is complex, but here they are aided by their experience gained in the city, by the mobility and dynamism found in urban areas. If they do not know anything about farming, they read books on the topic and do research. Often the local farmers then turn to the newcomers for advice. Still, the city experience is not valued in the country and is not incorporated into the reference.

Finally, the reference "we - a peasant nation" is evident in that group of respondents that was born in the pre-World War I period and remembers agrarian Latvia.

The second group of interviewees--those who changed professions from city to rural life--supports the hypothesis regarding the influence of rotating cultural self-references in societal communication on their life values and motivation for action. Themes and ideas repeat, as well as expressions, which refer to literature in describing oneself as a part of Latvian society. The interviews repeatedly refer to the following principles that help shape the interviewees identity and that express the references used in society to describe what it means to be Latvian (we - a nation of peasants): 1) freedom, living in the country provides freedom, freedom also to realize one's own dreams; 2) living in the country to live in a natural and ecologically clean environment. The inability to express in words one's relationship to nature is almost like a religion in secular society 3) love of the land as a traditional reference point is being replaced with a pragmatic relationship to the land as producer (especially for wealthy landowners); 4) an attitude about Latvianness, which they see in the country.

Living in the country is a mission, especially today in the context of the EU and Latvia's self-image
5) a relationship to the city as an unfriendly environment for Latvianness and oneself.

Regarding the city, the respondents often neglect to mention: 1) the knowledge, education, dynamism gained in the city, as well as the openness toward new methodologies, which often present a conflict between newcomers/urbanites and locals 2) nor do they mention a deeper motivation in the beginning and mid-1980s. When directly asked, they most often mention peasant genes.

The second group of working interviewees is more pragmatic. Nevertheless, they are also emotional and provide examples of deeper reasons, not motivated from within, but rather in response to latent educational functions--the coding of cultural self-reference and the dissemination of this reference to urbanites through literature. Cultural self-references "travel" from one interview to another and support the coordination of the cultural self-reference "we - a nation of peasants" that is used in societal communication.

The study concludes with an interview with a representative of the reference group, a university instructor, whose experience illustrates the *interpenetration* - participation in farm work - described in system theory. The interview demonstrates the attitude toward cultural self-reference and understanding of the narrative - the influence of one's family's stories in an individual's actions. The final interview illustrates the theoretical concept of opening the self-reference as a self-observation with rationality and irony.

2.3 Conclusion and Results

A culture's self-descriptions found in the space of social communication indicate, that there is no universal correspondence between how a system (society) establishes its relationship to the outside world. For this reason, the empirical section's results lead to the conclusion that self-description is no longer useful. This is evident both in social structure and semantics and encourages society to remain open to change in self-descriptions.

The dissertation offers the hypothesis, that cultural narratives shape the individual's understanding of him/herself in society. Society, in communication with itself, reproduces a historical self-reference as a stereotype about the Latvian nation, and, with the changing sociopolitical situation, individuals gain new experience and change their image of themselves, which potentially could also influence the development of a new societal self-description.

General Conclusions

1. This dissertation utilizes N. Luhmann's system theory as a basis to analyze one of Latvian culture's self-references *we - a peasant culture* and its associations with the cultural paradigm. The cultural paradigm is shaped by the acquisition of knowledge about oneself, in this case from self-references that have been developed through social communication. The dissertation builds on Luhmann's system theory main ideas: in social communication self-observations are formed, which are then recorded in written texts and are disseminated (a cycle of information from the individual to society and back) in the public sphere of communication. Gradually these self-observations gain support in society and members of society agree on these characterizations. As they are preserved and passed to other generations, these become self-references, a way in which the society can distinguish itself. System theory describes this as *interpenetration*. In society's communication, narratives preserve this self-reference and there develops a cultural paradigm, which is a conservative view of oneself, and a factor in impeding development. System theory considers self-reference as a border, whose opening or expansion illustrates a system's readiness for dynamic change.

2. This dissertation also utilizes sociological methods that consider the relationship between culture and action as the recreation of self-reference paradigm of continuity and stability. M. Archer's metaphor "*seams of a garment*" is used to analyze Latvian narratives that temporally preserve continuity, regardless of the historical breaks of the 20th century. The dissertation does not consider narratives as ideological constructions, but as instruments to foster later actions, and which include a self-reference of society. The conclusion is drawn, that narratives with the culture code transferred through education recreate not only social action, but also mentalities.

3. Narrative theories reveal a society's communication about itself, regardless whether the self-reference is lost in a functionally differentiated society. In Latvian society "*we - a peasant nation*" was used in the nationalist movements of the nineteenth century. Peasantry/rural culture is understood as Latvianness, and each measure that takes away the opportunities to develop agriculture, such as the current transformation into the free market system and integration into the European Union, is seen as an attack on Latvianness.

4. The dissertation joins macrolevel system theory with current theories on narratives and empirical studies to determine the way in which self-references form. This provided the opportunity to discover that the self-reference horizon repeats traditional Latvian society's understanding of *itself*. In the 20th century, in both periods of independence, cultural texts (economic, literary, today even

in the media) the representatives of the reference group return to the self-reference *we - a peasant nation*, as a means of self-description. This is passed to other generations through socialization, family histories and education as the cultural code in literature in which agrarian themes are dominant. Psychologically and culturally the Latvian education model indoctrinates the new leaders of Latvian culture in the values of peasant life. Latvianness is understood and passed to other generations as a rural culture, which will foster unity, because *all Latvians are genetically peasants*. The study discovers that there are more aspects of Latvian society to find, research, and understand.

5. The dissertation utilized 20 in-depth interviews with a selected group of respondents, including 5 interviews with self-reference agents. In the empirical section, original interview questions have been prepared. The answers have been analyzed in the context of the dissertation's hypothesis, that social action as well as the way an individual sees him/herself is influenced by cultural narratives, collective memory, and education code; it is linked to society's self-reference.

6. The interviews analyzed illustrate the circle of social communication, in which society has agreed to its description and utilizes it as a self-reference. Urban intellectuals express the self-reference. The intellectuals see themselves as members of or close to peasants (4.1., 4.2.). The dissertation notes several communication ties in these texts, when one author refers to another and vice versa.

7. In their descriptions of themselves, the interviewees illustrated self-reference communication, from reference agents (givers) to reference receivers and users. The most important values found in the self-reference *we--a peasant culture* are: 1) freedom, living in the country means freedom (5.1.1., 5.1.2.1., 5.1.3.1., 5.3.5.); 2) life in the country as an ecological and clean life (5.1.2.3., 5.5.3); 3) love of land, from the traditional reference to a pragmatic attitude toward agriculture as a producer (5.4.10., 5.3.11.); 4) Latvianness as an identity possible to preserve in the country 5) in a latent manner the city as a threat to Latvianness and national unity (5.1.1.2, 5.1.2., 5.1.2.2); 6) the use of the self-reference "we - peasants" by different members of the study indicates the high level at which this description is coordinated, which creates a tautological circle around society, which may be changed with the expansion of one's own worldview (3.3.). If the reference changed in the interviews after ten years of farming, then it was still "renewed" among urban intellectuals. This illustrates the different nature of the paradigm among different groups in society (3.2.1). In the interviews, all references made were based on the principle of difference - country vs. city, Latvians against other nationalities, urbanites vs. local farmers--as is described in system theory. Building on N. Luhmann's system theory on the communication cycle of self-reference, the dissertation finds that in order to influence societal change in the meaning of *autopoiesis*, rationality must be used in

the self-description of Latvian culture, as it is described in section 5.5, in which rationality is combined with irony.

8. The data acquired through empirical methods shows that a) the experience of the last ten years changes an individual's observations of him or herself, which may influence society's orientation toward new descriptions of itself; b) representatives of the reference group may shape resources for this change, where the self-reference consists of several viewpoints. This would recognize not only differences, but also the effects of the synthesis of cultures (Latvian and Baltic German) as something that has been thus far overlooked c) the social changes in the last ten years have been so drastic that in describing them interviewees use the model of the industrialized societies as a continuation of the existing reference about Latvianness in the country (from a peasant to a farmer, manager, to the modern rural life--employment in the city, life in the country); d) the city reference remains negative, because Latvian culture has never developed stable emotional relationship with the urban environment.