RESEARCH PAPER

Membership and contributorship in organizations: An update of modern systems theory

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Abstract

This article argues for an update of modern systems theory, in particular of the
systems theory of organizations. Recent works have pointed out that existing
understandings of membership fall short when it comes to accounting for the
modern variety of organizational phenomena. This is also true for modern sys-
tems theory, which still relies on a rather conventional understanding of mem-
bership. Against this backdrop, I propose to draw on recent developments in
related fields of communication-centred organization research and to adopt
the notion of 'contributorship'. Following such works, contributorship can be
defined as the decision on the distribution of rights to participate in the inter-
nal decision processes of an organization. By contrast, I propose to reformulate
the notion of membership and define it as the decision that establishes
whether a certain person belongs to the organization or not, that is, is a mem-
ber of it or not. In addition, I propose to drop the existing systems-theoretical
assertion that membership is the core-defining premise for the constitution of
an organization. Instead, I argue that contributorship, not membership, is the
basic premise needed by every organization to be constituted. Building on
these insights, I will conclude the article by discussing the three possibilities of
affiliating persons to an organization, that is, as mere members, mere contribu-
tors or both.

KEYWORDS

contributorship, membership, Niklas Luhmann, organization theory, systems theory

1 | INTRODUCTION

Membership is one of the notions most taken for granted
in organization theory. The usual assumption prevalent in
most contemporary works is that organizations have mem-
bers. Membership is broadly seen as a crucial condition for
constituting formal organizations and marking organiza-
tional boundaries. Scholars assert that organizations have
to distinguish between members and non-members; that
they have to preselect individuals to become members
before allowing them to participate in the organizational
processes; and that the boundary of an organization is
defined by who are members and who are not members
(see, e.g., Ahrne, 1994; Aldrich, 2008; King, Felin, &

Whetten, 2010; Scott & Davis, 2007). This is true also for modern systems theory[1] as developed by Luhmann (2012, 2013) (see, e.g., Andersen & Born, 2008; Kette & Tacke, 2015; Kühl, 2015; Nassehi, 2005; Schirmer & Michailakis, 2015). Although defining organizations as processual entities consisting of decision communications, Luhmann insisted that organizations need to preselect *certain* persons as members in an appointment procedure thereby distributing rights to participate in the organizational communication processes (Luhmann, 2018, p. 45).

Generally, in organization studies, one can identify two different core ideas of what membership is. On the one hand, most scholars—including Luhmann—see membership as a structural element or a fixed premise implying that certain individuals become members at one point and then remain members until their memberships are terminated. In this rather static view, membership is tightly coupled to certain identifiable persons who are the members (see, e.g., Ahrne, 1994; Aldrich, 2008; Andersen & Pors, 2014; Drori, Meyer, & Hwang, 2006; King et al., 2010; Luhmann, 2018). Some literature, on the other hand, has suggested that membership should be seen as a precarious process in which the degree of belonging to an organization is constantly renegotiated. In this processual view, membership is rather a question of the degree of actual participantship in the organizational processes (e.g., McPhee & Zaug, 2000; Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003; Scott & Davis, 2007, pp. 24–25). Pfeffer and Salancik (2003), for example, have suggested that membership should be understood as a gradual phenomenon by arguing that 'the extent to which any given person is or is not a member of the organization' (p. 32) depends on the degree to which the behaviour of an individual takes part in the organization's activities.

However, recent works have shown that both views fall short when trying to get a comprehensive picture of people's inclusion into and affiliation with organizations. Scholars have reported on a myriad of new forms of organization—such as certain activist and hacker collectives, terrorist organizations, bike commuters or technology start-ups—that partly refrain from deciding on memberships and instead employ different ways of including people (e.g., Ahrne & Brunsson, 2019; Ahrne, Brunsson, & Seidl, 2016; Apelt et al., 2017; Kühl, 2013; Wilhoit & Kisselburgh, 2015).

In particular, the static understanding of membership seems not to be able to account for a number of

organizations that do not employ memberships in the sense of preselecting certain persons as participants (e.g., Ahrne et al., 2016; Wilhoit & Kisselburgh, 2015). For instance, Dobusch and Schoenborn (2015) —drawing on Luhmann—have pointed out that the hacker collective 'Anonymous' in fact can be treated as an organization in the sense that it consists of distinctive interconnected decision communications but that the collective does not preselect certain persons as members through decisions. Similarly, and building on Luhmann as well, Grothe-Hammer (2019) has described the case of a voluntary association that also can be understood as an organization in the sense that it is a distinctive social system constituted by decision making—but without employing any decisions on memberships at all. In both cases, people can participate in an organization's decision-making processes without a previously concluded appointment decision.

The processual understanding of membership in turn could in principle account for these latter two cases. However, this particular understanding does not seem to be able to account for the rich diversity of instances of membership in which certain persons are indeed considered to be members but cannot participate in the organization's processes (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011). Bencherki and Snack (2016) asserted that people can be mere members who decidedly belong to an organization but without having any right of participation, as it is the case with many customer clubs like the IKEA family club (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011). Membership in this shape might even come coupled with certain rules to follow but still without any participation rights in the internal activities of the organization (Ahrne et al., 2016)—as this seems to be the case for people performing work for digital platforms like the ride-sharing providers 'Uber' and 'Lyft' (Kirchner & Schüßler, 2019). Hence, one can identify a variety of forms of membership in which certain persons are selected as members of an organization—often even working as a member of an organization for the organization—but without any degree of internal participation.

Against this backdrop, some scholars have argued for combining both views on membership in an integrated framework. More specifically, Bencherki and Snack (2016) as well as Grothe-Hammer (2019) have proposed to reanimate the classic notion of 'contributorship' (Barnard, 1938) and use it as an additional category to the notion of membership, to account for those organizational phenomena that cannot be captured adequately by the existing membership-biased frameworks and to provide a more nuanced understanding for the relation between organizations and those people involved in them. Specifically, they suggest that the term *membership* be used only for the static understanding of membership, that is, for those people having an explicit 'administrative tie' with

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[1] In line with a seminal paper by Schreyögg and Sydow (2010), I will use the term 'modern systems theory' to refer to the communication-centred theory of autopoietic social systems as outlined by Niklas Luhmann in 1984 and further developed by him and other scholars (see, e.g., Bakken & Hernes, 2003; Cooren & Seidl, 2019; Seidl & Becker, 2005) since then.

the organization, and the term *contributorship* for the processual understanding, that is, for those who actually participate in the internal processes of the organization (Bencherki & Snack, 2016, p. 285; Grothe-Hammer, 2019). In this article, I argue that this distinction should be adopted by modern systems theory as well.

Hence, I ask the question: *how can we theorize contributorship in systems-theoretical terms, and how can we reframe membership accordingly*? I shall argue that contributorship can, on the one hand, supplement membership as a structural element of an organization. I shall moreover argue that contributorship should replace membership not as a structural element in general but as a constitutive feature of organizations. Luhmann (2018) defined organizations as social systems constituted by distinctive interconnected processes of decision making. Decisions are thereby understood as a specific type of communication that attempt to select a certain alternative while simultaneously also communicating discarded alternatives that could have been selected instead. While an organization indeed needs persons to participate in decisions to make them happen, I will show that organizations need not necessarily channel this participation through the selection of specific persons as members. Instead, organizations can and do manage actual participation in multiple other ways. Hence, membership remains a possible and, in most cases, very important element for organizations—but indeed not a necessary one for organizations to emerge.

I assert that this theoretical move would be beneficial for organization theory and sociology in general. Modern systems theory is one of the most elaborated sociological theories there is, providing extensive understandings for any kind of social phenomena. In the past, this theory has proven able to provide substantial insights through the combination of meta-, micro-, meso- and macro-levels of theorizing (Apelt et al., 2017; Besio & Meyer, 2015; Michailakis & Schirmer, 2014), often by the combination of organizational theory with other important research themes such as risk (Luhmann, 2008), disaster management (Grothe-Hammer & Berthod, 2017) or ageing societies (Schirmer & Michailakis, 2018). The theory has moreover been an important source of inspiration for several other organization theories.[2] Hence, I see a further development of the understanding of organizations within modern systems theory that takes into account the evolution of organizational forms in recent decades, as an important step to maintain and expand this unprecedented explanatory potential.

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[2]See Besio and Meyer (2015) for new institutionalism; Ahrne et al. (2016) for partial organization theory; Ahrne and Brunsson (2008) for meta-organization theory; Schoeneborn et al. (2014), Coreen & Seidl (2019) for the 'communicative constitution of organization' perspective.

2 | ORGANIZATION AS COMMUNICATION

Modern systems theory as devised by Luhmann (2012, 2013) builds on a social constructivist understanding of social reality. Luhmann (1990) asserts that social reality consists of and is constructed by communication and only by communication. The world as such has no meaning, no information (Luhmann, 1995b). Meaning is created through observing the world, and it is observed by communicating about it. Indeed, a single individual might be able to observe the world with his or her own eyes and make psychological sense out of it. But on a social level—on the level of what is going on between people—something becomes real only if it is communicated about.

To take place, communication needs at least two human beings. There has to be someone uttering something and another one providing an understanding that information has been uttered. Hence, communication needs three elements to be established: utterance, understanding and information (Luhmann, 1992b). 'Understanding' thereby does not mean that someone 'understood' what another person wanted to say—that would be simply impossible because one cannot think in the head of the other. Understanding simply means that it was understood that an utterance (i.e., something was expressed in a certain way, e.g., in words or gestures) is different from the information (i.e., is the actual content) that has been uttered—thereby constructing the information at this very moment. Hence, communication occurs only when a difference of utterance and information is understood. (Luhmann, 1992b, p. 252).

Although people are, of course, an important precondition for communication to emerge, they do not determine the construction of meaningful communication (Luhmann, 2002, pp. 169–184). The meaning that is constructed in this process cannot be traced back to a single individual. Novel information is created that is neither identical with what someone says (utterance), nor is it congruent with what someone psychologically understands. Communication is a social construction that arises in-between individuals and has its own meaning and characteristics (Luhmann, 1996b). As such, it exists only if it goes on, because the understanding of an uttered information is realized observably only when another communication arises that—directly or indirectly—refers to the previous one. Only by the next communication can the previous communication be observed as such and thereby gain social existence (Luhmann, 1992b).

When certain communications connect to certain other communications and exclude the rest, a social system emerges that can be distinguished from its

environment. As Grothe-Hammer and Schoeneborn (2019) put it,

> These communication systems are operationally closed in the sense that they constitute a boundary between the internal and the external by constantly drawing distinctions that mark what is treated by the system as internal and which is excluded to the horizon of unactualized possibilities. (p. 63)

One kind of social systems is organizations. Organizations are social systems that are constructed and reproduced by a certain type of communication, that is, communications that are decisions. Organizations can be defined as

> Systems that consist of decisions and that themselves produce the decisions of which they consist, through the decisions of which they consist. (Luhmann, 1992a, p. 166, as cited and translated from German by Seidl, 2005, p. 39).

At this point, it is important to note that Luhmann employs an understanding of decisions that is significantly different from other existing definitions:

> What is particular about decisions is that they are 'compact communications', which communicate their own contingency ('contingency' here in the sense of 'also possible otherwise'). In contrast to an ordinary communication, which only communicates a specific content that has been selected (e.g. 'I love you'), a decision communication communicates also – explicitly or implicitly – that there are alternatives that could have been selected instead (e.g. 'I am going to employ candidate A and not candidate B'). (Seidl, 2005, p. 39)

Hence, decisions are understood as inherently paradoxical communications because they attempt to select a certain alternative while at the same time communicating that there are other alternatives that could have been selected instead (Luhmann, 2018). As a result, 'one decision calls for ensuing decisions, resulting in a self-reproducing stream of decisions' (Ahrne et al., 2016, p. 95) that constitute the organization as a social system. This does not mean that any communication in an organization has to be a decision, but it implies that anything can be treated as a decision, that is, if a selection between

alternatives is understood, and that every communication within an organization happens embedded in decision-related processes (Luhmann, 2018, p. 45).

The organization can moreover make decisions that act as premises for further decisions, that is, as the organizational structures. Organizations can, for instance, decide on certain rules, goals, vertical and horizontal hierarchies, communication channels between positions and, indeed membership (Luhmann, 2018). Although membership is only one among multiple possible decision premises, Luhmann (2013) asserted that it has a special function and serves as a kind of super-premise for all other premises of the organization. In the following, I will, hence, take a closer look at the existing definition of membership in modern systems theory.

3 | THE EXISTING DEFINITION OF MEMBERSHIP

In modern systems theory, membership is so far seen as a necessary precondition for the construction of an organization (Drepper, 2005; Kühl, 2013, 2015; Nassehi, 2005; Schirmer & Michailakis, 2015). Although Luhmann defined organizations as social systems that consist of decision communications, he insisted on the significance of predecided memberships. According to him, 'decision dependent membership permits the formation of autopoietic systems of a peculiar type', that is, 'organizations'. (Luhmann, 2008, p. 188). He defined memberships as 'decisions concerning entering (appointment) and leaving (dismissal)' the organization and argued that organizations need an appointment process to decide whether a certain person belongs in the organization or not (Luhmann, 2018, p. 235). In doing so, Luhmann defined membership as a decision premise for the ongoing decision processes within the organization.

Hence, the Luhmannian understanding of membership is explicitly different from the aforementioned strong processual understandings of membership. For Luhmann, membership is structure, not process (Martens, 2006). Indeed, in the understanding of modern systems theory, structures exist only in the process of communication. However, structures are temporarily stable expectations that serve as orientation points for ensuing communications and decisions. (Seidl, 2005, p. 45). Hence, decision premises such as membership are always 'valid for more than one decision' (Luhmann, 2003, p. 45). Decision premises are created in one decision event and reproduced in ensuing decision events that refer to these premises—and can of course be altered or discarded in these ensuing decision events (Martens, 2006).

The capacity of organizations to decide on membership as temporarily stable premises for decision making has significant implications (Kühl, 2013; Luhmann, 1964; Seidl & Mormann, 2014). By employing membership, expectations can be generalized in two directions. On the one hand, selected members can expect to remain members as long as they do not provide any reason for dismissal (or reach a predefined termination date) and to receive certain benefits agreed upon such as payments. On the other hand, organizations can bind highly generalized expectations to memberships (Luhmann, 1964, 2020). Organizations can 'condition the behaviour of members as opposed to that of nonmembers' by making 'joining and leaving (employment and dismissal) subject to conditions' (Luhmann, 2008, p. 188). The organization can, for example, reliably expect that members show up at certain times in certain places and do certain things like assembling a car or selling food and beverages. The organization can moreover decide on changes to those expectations over time as long as these expectations remain within a 'zone of indifference' (Barnard, 1938) of the affected persons. It can change working hours, working tasks, membership fees, or main goals as long as it remains attractive for the person to remain a member under these conditions (Luhmann, 2018, pp. 81–84).

Hence, in the existing Luhmannian understanding, membership describes a decision on appointment or dismissal of 'specific persons' (Andersen & Pors, 2014, p. 178) that serves as a premise for organizational decision-making processes by granting and ascribing certain rights and duties to participate in these very decision processes (Luhmann, 2018, p. 45). This understanding of membership remains very popular among many scholars who employ modern systems theory, for example, in works on foreign aid (Kühl, 2015), social work (Schirmer & Michailakis, 2015) or university rankings (Kette & Tacke, 2015; for more examples, see Andersen & Born, 2008; Drepper, 2005; Kühl, 2013; Martens, 2006; Nassehi, 2005). Building on this understanding, scholars could even show that some organizations push the conditions of membership to the extreme, for example, when organizations specify membership as 'always preliminary, always open, and always ready to become something else' (Andersen & Pors, 2014, p. 179).

In modern systems theory, membership is so far seen not only as an important aspect of organization but also as a constitutive one (Kühl, 2013; Nassehi, 2005). Luhmann has repeatedly clarified that membership has a special importance in comparison with other decision premises. He asserted that 'membership is the premise for deciding on the premises for making decisions'. (Luhmann, 2013, p. 143),[3] ultimately defining membership as some kind of super-premise without which other organizational decision premises and processes would not be possible. In particular, he argued that the structural elements of an organization—such as rules, goals, vertical and horizontal hierarchies—are collapsed into positions, hence making membership decisions crucial for 'filling these positions with people' (Luhmann, 1998, p. 106). Consequently, membership decisions are then needed to happen before a person can actually fill such a position and then participate in organizational decisions:

> Even the authorization or duty to take part in the communication of decisions *goes back* to decisions made in the system, namely to the appointment or dismissal of members of the organization. (Luhmann, 2018, p. 45; italics added)

However, in recent years, several empirical works—some of which build explicitly on Luhmann—have reported on cases in which people who have not been appointed or selected as members nevertheless participate in the internal processes of an organization. They just participate in internal decision-making processes for some time and then leave again, perhaps without ever coming back (Grothe-Hammer, 2019; Kühl, 2013). In such cases, the organization does not know who these people are; there are no decisions selecting certain persons who may 'enter' the organization. For example, Grothe-Hammer (2019) has described the case of a voluntary association that refrained from deciding on memberships at all. As he reports, there were no decisions appointing specific persons as members. Instead, the association employed decisions on regular meeting times and places as well as certain forms of online participation. People could just participate online or come to meetings, participate and vote in substantial decisions and then leave again—without anyone else knowing who they are and if they would ever join again. In doing so, Grothe-Hammer (2019) also made clear that the voluntary association in question constitutes a distinctive social system based on interconnected decision processes, thereby featuring multiple internal structures including goals, rules, recurrent meetings, departments and hierarchies between those departments. Although not officially founded in a legal sense, this association even turned out to be communicatively addressable by externals as a collective person—which are all characteristics exclusively

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[3]Similarly (Luhmann, 2017, p. 205), 'organization systems are formed if it can be presumed that a decision can be made about joining and leaving the system and if rules can be developed for taking this decision' and (Luhmann, 2008, p. 188) 'the decision on membership is then also a decision to accept the conditions of membership; and this means deciding to accept the premises for deciding'.

attributed to organizations in modern systems theory (Luhmann, 2018). Other scholars have reported on similar cases as well (Bencherki & Snack, 2016; Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015).

Against this backdrop, I argue—in line with previous works by Ahrne et al. (2016) and Grothe-Hammer (2019)—that modern systems theory should drop membership as a defining criterion for organizations. Indeed, membership can be seen as a decision premise by which certain decision rights can be attributed to certain persons who thereby gain the right to participate in the organization's decision-making processes. However, as Grothe-Hammer (2019) has recently pointed out, the attribution of decision rights to persons need not necessarily be distributed by decisions about membership. There are ways of distributing possibilities for persons 'to take part in the communication of decisions' (Luhmann, 2018, p. 45) that are different from selecting 'specific persons' (Andersen & Pors, 2014, p. 178) as members.

4 | SUPPLEMENTING MEMBERSHIP WITH CONTRIBUTORSHIP

As mentioned before, some scholars have suggested that the classic notion of contributorship be revised to better elucidate the basic relationship between organizations and those people viewed as belonging to them (Bencherki & Snack, 2016; Grothe-Hammer, 2019). The general idea of contributorship is not new. Chester Barnard (1938) already used this notion in his groundbreaking work 'The function of the executive'. He suggested that we use the term *contributions* 'for the activities constituting organization' (Barnard, 1938, p. 75), and scholars such as March and Simon (1993) adopted this understanding in subsequent years. Following this view, contributors can be seen, hence, as those persons who actually participate in the internal organizational processes. However, Barnard as well as March and Simon saw membership as a subcategory of contributorship implying that members always participate. In this respect, the classic understanding of contributorship can be seen as a variant of the above-outlined processual view on membership. Barnard's basic understanding of organization as being constituted by contributions from participants—not necessarily by members—was forgotten over time.[4]

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[4]In fact, March and Simon are nowadays even cited as proponents of a strong and rather static membership perspective (see,
e.g., Schoeneborn & Scherer, 2012, p. 964) and not as the supporters of a processual perspective they originally were.

As mentioned above, in recent articles, Bencherki and Snack (2016) as well as Grothe-Hammer (2019) have suggested distinguishing between contributors and members as two categories. They suggest using the term 'membership' for the fixed 'administrative tie' between members and organizations and employing the term 'contributorship' for the aspect of actual participation in the organizational processes. In this article, I build on this suggestion and aim to elaborate on the theoretical implications of both notions.

I argue that both membership and contributorship can be understood as decision premises of an organization. Following Ahrne et al. (2016), I define *membership* as *the result of the decision that a certain person belongs to the organization or not, i.e., is a member of it or not.* I define *contributorship* as *the decision on the distribution of rights to participate in the internal decision processes of an organization.* Both premises can be used separately or combined with each other.

Hence, in the following pages, I want to elaborate on what these definitions mean in the communicative practice of an organization. Let me first start with the definition of membership, which is fairly easy to describe. Membership means that there is a decision of the organization that some person is considered to belong to the organization and that this decision remains accepted temporarily in the ongoing organizational processes. This decision can be made verbally and/or textually. In any case, membership implies some kind of uttered claim that a certain person belongs to a certain organization. Often, membership is fixed in some textual documents. Organizations typically feature membership forms, membership lists and directories, contracts and/or membership IDs. Such documents usually help the organization to 'remember' who its members are and have to be updated by further decisions on new members or the dismissal of existing ones, but in between those updates, decisions remain stable over time as premises.

To better understand what contributorship means, I need to dive a little bit deeper into some core assumptions of modern systems theory. Although the assertion that one is a contributor in an organization when contributing to the organizational communication processes might seem plausible, I assume that it is fairly unclear what it means in practice. At first sight, one might argue that a person participates in the organizational decisions if he or she can be identified as someone who made a decision that is accepted as organizational. However, as outlined above, modern systems theory defines social systems as consisting of nothing but communication, and it defines decisions as a type of communication. Hence, these core definitions imply that it is not the persons who make decisions but only communications (Luhmann, 1992b).

Nevertheless, as mentioned above, communication relies on people to participate in it. A person can be the origin of an utterance or the point of understanding. For an utterance to occur, a person has to do something. The person has to act, which usually means saying, writing, gesturing or facially expressing something. For an understanding to occur, another person has to perceive an act of utterance and produce a new utterance (Luhmann, 2002, p. 177). Only in this next utterance is the foregoing communication realized because only then does the understanding of an information that has been uttered become social reality. Hence, persons act as *addresses* that connect one communication instance with the next one and so on (Blaschke, Schoeneborn, & Seidl, 2012; Luhmann, 1996a).

As outlined above, in an organization, this network of communication events consists of interconnected episodes of decision communications that produce the organization as a social system and are thereby produced by this very social system (Nassehi, 2005). A person can be seen as belonging to the organization when it acts as an address in the internal communication process that constitutes the organization. Empirically, this insight means that at the very instant when a person successfully acts as an address in the decision process, the person is accepted as a contributor, that is, when a person is accepted as a sender and receiver of utterances in the internal organizational communication process.

Indeed, an organization can make decisions that define that only those may participate in these communications who have been accepted as members—but they can also decide to accept contributions from people who are not members. Such a processual acceptance of persons as contributors does not necessarily imply that an organization needs to select certain persons who then act as contributors. Becoming such a contributor can happen just in the instance and it can even happen retrospectively (Bencherki & Snack, 2016; Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015). This is due to the specific characteristics of communication. A communication is realized over time only when an understanding occurs—which, of course, has to happen after the act of uttering has occurred. However, the utterance becomes an utterance only if it is understood as such (Luhmann, 1992b). Before that, an utterance is simply an act. The identification of a communication as belonging to the organization or not is therefore not made at the instant when someone utters something but at the instant when a difference between utterance and information is understood and specifically if it is understood as belonging to the organization (Luhmann, 2008, p. 189).

The classic idea of membership usually helps in this process of distinguishing between internal and external communication and hence in identifying organizational boundaries (Kühl, 2013; Luhmann, 2018, p. 81). If a member utters something to another member, for example, during their working hours, there is a high probability that the occurring communication belongs to the organization. However, even in such cases, there is no determinism. It could also be possible that both members are discussing a private issue—like their upcoming barbecue. In this case, the occurring communication would not be part of the organizational communication process, because most certainly the organization as such would not suddenly engage in deciding which meat to buy and who should be assigned to bring the salad. Instead, the organization could only make the conversation as such a matter to be discussed in the organization—for instance as an irregular conversation that happened during working hours (Luhmann, 2008, p. 189). But in this case, the organization would observe only the corresponding conversation but would not include it directly into the internal decision process (cf. Luhmann, 1995b, 2018).

Therefore, even membership as a decision premise cannot predetermine which communication events belong to an organization and which do not. The question whether a communication event belongs to the organization or not is in any case answered on a case by case basis. An organization is a network of ongoing interconnected decision communications—and nothing more. Hence, I argue in contradiction to Luhmann (2008, p. 188; 2018, p. 45; 2013, p. 142–145) that for decisions to occur and to become interconnected, and for making decisions on premises for further decisions, there is no need for preselected persons (members). On a very basic level, an organization needs first and foremost people who contribute to the internal communication processes—whether these people have been selected as certain identifiable persons or not. As a consequence, I assert that *contributorship, not membership, is the basic premise needed by every organization to be constituted.*

5 | MANAGING CONTRIBUTORSHIP

Every organization needs people who participate in the internal decision processes and make these possible. In other words, every organization needs multiple people who contribute to the internal processes. In principle, everyone who participates in these internal decision processes can be regarded as a contributor. Nevertheless, such contributions are usually not random. Organizations manage the possibilities of how contributions are possible in several ways (see Grothe-Hammer, 2019). As decision systems, organizations decide on the distribution

of rights to contribute to the internal decision processes (Blaschke, 2015). The classic assumption in this respect is that organizations select specific persons as members and grant them certain decision rights. However, as outlined above, organizations can also refrain from selecting members and instead rely on mere contributors. Hence, memberships that are combined with certain decision rights are only one out of several possibilities as to how contributions can be managed. In addition to the selection of certain persons, organizations can also decide on 'spatial, temporal, attributional, resource-related, and/or quantitative-limitational premises for distributing possibilities of contributions' (Grothe-Hammer, 2019, p. 86). For instance, organizations can define certain places and time frames in which people can come and participate. They can also decide on certain channels through which contributions must be made and more. Table 1 shows the several possibilities of how contributorship premises can be decided as outlined by Grothe-Hammer (2019).

Only the listed social dimension implies a decision on membership that is combined with the distribution of actual decision rights (Luhmann, 1995a, p. 196). Apart from that, there are multiple other possibilities of deciding on contributorship possibilities that do not rely on the preselection of specific persons. These possibilities can be used separately or in combination with each other, and by doing so, organizations can increase or decrease the degree of limitation of the possibilities to contribute.

TABLE 1 Possible forms of contributorship (adapted from Grothe-Hammer, 2019, p. 102)

Dimension of contributorship	Description
Social	Organizations decide on who is to be regarded as a contributor.
Spatial	Organizations decide on specific places at which contributions can be made.
Temporal	Organizations decide on specific time frames during which contributions can be made.
Attributional	Organizations decide on specific skills and characteristics one must possess in order to contribute.
Resource-related	Organizations decide on specific resources that one must have access to in order to contribute.
Quantitative-limitational	Organizations decide that a specific number of people can contribute, on a first-come-first-served basis.

In all cases, the decision on contributorship can take place instantaneously. It can take place at the very same instant when the contributor participates for the first time in an internal decision or even later in retrospect (Bencherki & Snack, 2016; Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015). As Bencherki and Snack (2016) illustrated, organizations can retrospectively decide that certain communications and decisions that happened in the past can be considered to be organizational.

6 | CONTRIBUTORSHIP AND MEMBERSHIP AS DISTINCTIVE DECISION PREMISES

The applied distinction between membership and contributorship qualifies as what can be called a 'false distinction' (Roth, 2019). While a 'true distinction' distinguishes two mutually exclusives from each other—two true opposites—a false distinction indicates different phenomena that nevertheless can overlap and are, hence, not mutually exclusive. However, a false distinction does not necessarily imply that it is a mistake to make such a distinction. It only means that such a distinction is not an either/or but only a This/That distinction. This is the case for the suggested distinction between membership and contributorship. Both categories describe a type of affiliation or inclusion of people (in)to an organization.

Roth (2019) recently suggested that such a false This/That distinction can sometimes be better understood by transforming it into 'two truly binary distinctions, This/Not-This and That/Not-That' (p. 91). By doing so, Roth argues that one could see further options emerging behind the false twosidedness of the This/That distinction. Accordingly, I will in the following transform the suggested distinction member/contributor into the two true distinctions member/non-member and contributor/non-contributor. By putting both into a cross table (Table 2), a so-called 'tetralemma' (Jayatilleke, 1967) can be derived, which shows four options of combining the two true distinctions.

Table 2 shows four possible combinations out of which three signify a relationship in which a person can be considered as 'belonging' to an organization. The fourth option 'neither member nor contributor' signifies

TABLE 2 Tetralemma for membership and contributorship

	Member	Non-member
Contributor	Member–contributor	Contributor only
Non-contributor	Member only	Neither member nor contributor

the complete exclusion of a person. Therefore, I will concentrate on the three possibilities of how a person may be affiliated with an organization. Hence, in the following, I want to discuss briefly these three options to clarify how contributorship and membership relate to each other and how they do not.

6.1 | Member–contributor or the classic concept of membership

Let me start with the first option 'member-contributor'. This option can be considered the standard view on what is usually considered to qualify as membership. This possibility is congruent with a decision in the social dimension of contributorship (see Table 1). In these cases, organizations decide on who is to be regarded as belonging to the organization—they select a certain person—and combine this who-decision with the attribution of certain rights to participate in the organizational decision processes. This possibility is the classic and well-established idea of how organizations include people into their processes.

Such member–contributorships can be seen as 'magical means to create organizational conformity' (Kühl, 2013, p. 24). Organizations set certain criteria that persons have to meet if they want to become and to remain members (Luhmann, 2008, p. 188). By using the element of membership, organizations are capable of imposing a myriad of wide-ranging expectations on certain persons—which otherwise would not be possible to this extent (Luhmann, 1964, 2020; Seidl & Mormann, 2014).

However, member–contributors are not just exposed to organizational decisions; they can also participate in these to a certain degree. The most obvious example of this kind of participation is probably worker participation. In many organizations, workers have participation rights in management decisions, for instance, through works councils or employee representatives. And even in organizations without such high-level participation structures, members usually have a considerable influence on the actual implementation of top-level decisions. On the one hand, decisions are often ambiguous and need follow-up decisions for concretization (March, 1994, p. 195). On the other hand, decisions are usually just a starting point that requires further decisions (Grothe-Hammer & Schoeneborn, 2019). For instance, a decision to buy a new machine such as a movie projector leads to further decisions on which model to buy from which seller for which price. Moreover, if a decision has been made by top managers, it has to 'travel' through the organization, which means that it has to be actualized and reactualized through multiple ensuing communication events. In every communication event, a new utterance,

a new understanding and new information are produced so that the original decision is reinterpreted every time leading to new understandings and new decisions that perhaps aim at implementing the original one or perhaps deviate from it. As a consequence, even auxiliary and unskilled workers usually have some degree of decision-making freedom. Some decision rights are thereby granted officially, whereas some possibilities to shape decisions are indeed unofficial or even illegal but nevertheless part of the organizational decision-making processes (Kühl, 2007).

An important effect of these participation possibilities is that organizational decisions gain a certain degree of legitimacy among members (March, 1994, pp. 167–168). Decisions in which one can participate typically gain legitimacy on the part of everyone involved in the process, even if the final decision outcome differs from what certain participants wished. This is because decisions are communications that communicate that one option has been selected out of multiple possibilities. Everyone participating in the process participates in the selection of a certain option, and as a result, it becomes difficult to oppose the decision that has been made. Participation implies that participants know why one possibility has been selected and that they participated in the selection process, and so it becomes difficult for those very participants to question the selection as such.

Therefore, relying on member–contributorships allows for the generalization of expectations and for creating at least some degree of legitimation of decisions among persons affiliated with the organization. Member–contributors can be understood as static addresses in the internal communication processes of an organization. Such members are appointed to certain positions that are stable points in connecting the internal communication events and structures with each other (Blaschke et al., 2012; Luhmann, 1998, p. 106). However, member–contributorships also have some downsides for the organizations. For instance, the appointing and dismissal of members are usually quite sophisticated processes binding time and other resources. Moreover, corresponding participation structures—such as works councils—can become very complex and heavy to handle.

6.2 | Contributor only

The possibility of mere contributorship implies the absence of a decided membership. As outlined above, mere contributorship means that persons participate in the organizational decision-making processes without being specifically selected and appointed by the organization. Examples of such organizations are hacker

collectives (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015) or certain activist associations (Grothe-Hammer, 2019). These organizations manage the participation in their internal decision processes in ways different from classic member–contributorships. People can, for example, participate in certain hacker collectives if they know how to get access to specific online forums and if they follow certain rules within these forums. In other cases, organizations can have physical board meetings in which the top-level decisions of the organization are made and where anyone who wants to, can drop by and participate in making these decisions. Mere contributorship implies that the organization does not decide on *who* is part of the organization but on other ways of *how* a person can contribute.

Employing mere contributorship has certain advantages and disadvantages. First and foremost, organizations that employ mere contributorship cannot rely on persons and cannot bind reliable expectations to these very persons. Although persons are usually exchangeable in organizations, organizations nevertheless bind expectations to these very persons. Organizations can reliably expect that appointed members will show up for work and fulfil certain assigned tasks. Of course, members leave organizations all the time but usually not all at once and often in an ordered and plannable manner.[5] Organizations that rely mainly on contributorship do not have this reliability. They do not know if certain persons will participate, and if they participate, how they will participate. Indeed, even these organizations can outline elaborated rules, temporary hierarchies and more and enforce these on their contributors but always only for the very instance of contributing (Grothe-Hammer, 2019).

Let me offer a hypothetical example here. Imagine that an organization has appointed a member named 'Jonas' with an agreement that Jonas gets paid monthly if he shows up for work 8 hr a day and fulfils certain tasks—an example of a classic member–contributor. The organization can now expect relatively reliably that Jonas will show up and fulfil these tasks. If the organization does not appoint a member to complete the tasks in question but relies on mere contributors, it can still offer money for the fulfilment of certain tasks within certain time frames, but it loses its capability to reliably expect that anyone shows up and who will show up when. Instead, those organizations have to hope for a constant influx of people who want to contribute (Grothe-Hammer, 2019).

Hence, while member–contributors can be understood as the static addresses in the organizational communication processes, mere contributors can be seen as dynamic addresses—they appear and go and perhaps reappear in another setting or not. This poses severe challenges to the stability of an organization's decisions and to the preservation of organizational knowledge. Usually, member–contributors serve as a 'stable frame' (Luhmann, 1996a, p. 345) in the internal decision processes. Certain persons in certain positions serve as a memory for the organization because as the addresses that connect communication events, it is incumbent on them to remember which decision histories are connected to which others and new ones (cf. Blaschke et al., 2012).

One solution to this problem is that organizations produce texts—often online—that remain publicly accessible so that any new contributor has access to previous decisions. Nevertheless, the permanency of decisions is limited because new contributors cannot just remember previous decisions; they have to learn about these. This implies that contributors who have not participated in the organization before did not directly participate in the previous decision processes but can only learn about these in new communications that do not directly connect to the previous ones (cf. Grothe-Hammer & Schoeneborn, 2019).

Another important aspect is conformity to organizational decisions. Indeed, even regular members of an organization are never fully compliant with existing decisions. Decisions are often ignored or altered (Kühl, 2007). However, in such cases, the organization always has the possibility to revoke membership if it decides that a certain member was not compliant enough, for example, if he or she has violated crucial rules. As a result, an organization can usually assume that its members are in general compliant with organizational decisions (Kühl, 2013). In case of contributorship, this generalized expectation does not exist. Nevertheless, even in cases of mere contributorships, people can be excluded if they do not follow decisions or rules (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015). In such cases, organizations need at some point to decide explicitly on who is not allowed to be a contributor. This means that over time organizations that rely mainly on contributorship have to implement a system of explicit 'non-memberships', which means the listing of certain people who shall not be allowed to contribute (Grothe-Hammer, 2019).

6.3 | Member only

If one is a member only, that person is communicatively coupled as belonging to the organization. Such a person cannot participate in the internal decision processes of an

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[5]In fact, unforeseen mass dismissals usually produce enormous problems for an organization, for example, when the whole board of a corporation or voluntary association resigns simultaneously.

organization. This has certain implications that differ from the other two forms of affiliation. Most importantly, an organization cannot rely on mere memberships. Organizations need persons who participate in the internal decision processes and who make these decision processes possible by their participation (cf. Barnard, 1938). Hence, while organizations can rely on member–contributors and in extreme cases even on mere contributors, the possibility of having mere members can in any case be only an additional option for an organization.

Hence, having members who are mere members is possible only if the organization has a core of persons who are actual contributors that participate in making decisions. The existence of mere members can be found more often than one might imagine. Ahrne and Brunsson (2011) have identified customer clubs like 'the IKEA Family Club or the British Airways Executive Club' (p. 87) as examples of this phenomenon. However, in such cases, the expectations and possibilities bound to this kind of membership are severely limited. Membership in a customer club generally entails very few duties on the part of the members. In most cases, these encompass only the duty to provide some personal information for which in return the customers can benefit from certain advantages like price discounts.

However, in this respect, I argue that the phenomenon of mere memberships is so far largely underestimated in the existing literature. Aside from customer clubs of airlines, furniture stores and restaurants, there are many other types of organizations that crucially employ mere memberships. Among such organizations are, for instance, many schools, prisons and digital platform organizations.

In many countries, schools have a long history of including students merely as members without considerable participation rights in the internal organizational decision processes (Erickson, 1987). Indeed, in many cases, there have been considerable changes in recent decades towards a better inclusion of pupils and parents into the school's decision-making processes—but often the extent of participation opportunities remains fairly limited (Drepper & Tacke, 2012). The same goes for inmates in prisons. In both cases, mere members are subject to a myriad of decisions and highly elaborated decision premises in the form of hierarchies, rules, monitoring systems and sanctioning mechanisms.

A similar picture unfolds in the case of platform organizations (Kirchner & Schüßler, 2019) such as the ride-sharing provider 'Uber'. Uber provides an application for smartphones through which users can book car rides offered by drivers who own privately held vehicles (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). Drivers as well as users are registered members of Uber, and Uber enforces strict and highly elaborated rules, monitoring systems and sanctioning mechanisms on its members, especially the drivers. Uber manages and controls the drivers through an elaborated algorithm-based system that sets working conditions for the driving service on offer and monitors it as well. Prices and routes are set by Uber, and via digital technologies, they even control the driving style of the drivers (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). Drivers are merely executers of the ride-sharing orders they receive from Uber and have no noteworthy decision rights of their own. They usually cannot participate in Uber's internal decision processes and can be understood as members without participation rights.

Accordingly, schools, prisons and certain platform organizations can be seen as examples of organizations that can generate highly elaborated and generalized expectations through the employment of mere memberships without contributorship possibilities (cf. Kirchner & Schüßler, 2019). However, mere memberships also come with certain complications. As mentioned above, organizations cannot rely only on mere members. Mere membership can always be only an additional possibility of affiliating persons. Moreover, mere memberships imply challenges for the perceived legitimacy of organizational decisions. Such a lack of legitimacy of decisions has been a well-known problem in schools and prisons for a long time now (e.g. Carrabine, 2005; Erickson, 1987), and it also seems to be a growing one for Uber. For instance, drivers are reported to have implemented their own control systems because they do not trust the automatic controls employed by Uber (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). Moreover, there is a significant movement that demands worker and participation rights for drivers—similar to those demands for substantial changes towards more democratic participation structures in schools in recent decades (Drepper & Tacke, 2012). Currently, the same development can be observed also for other platform organizations such as YouTube (Chen, 2019). Hence, there seem to be considerable differences between the possibilities of what an organization can achieve with mere memberships and what it can achieve with member–contributorships.

7 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article, I have proposed that the concept of organizational contributorship be integrated into modern systems theory. In particular, I have argued that contributorship can be understood as a decision premise in organizations to manage the distribution of rights to participate in the internal decision processes of an

organization. In systems-theoretical terms, contributors can be understood as those people who act and are accepted as senders and receivers in the internal communication processes of an organization. By contrast, I have proposed to reframe membership as a decision premise that defines whether a certain person belongs to the organization or not, that is, is a member of it or not.

Contrary to the existing assertion in modern systems theory on the special relevance of membership as a kind of super-premise for constituting organizations, this article has shown that instead contributorship must be seen as the basic premise needed by every organization to become constituted. Organizations need people who participate in the organizational decision processes, but they do not necessarily need to select certain persons in an appointment procedure to facilitate participation in decision making. Hence, an organization cannot exist without contributors, but it can without members.

Both notions—membership and contributorship—can be understood as decision premises of an organization. These premises are related and do not necessarily exclude each other. Hence, by adding the notion of contributorship and reframing the existing notion of membership, three possibilities can be derived of how a person can belong to an organization, that is, as a member and contributor (member-contributor), as a contributor only or as a member only. All three possibilities have different implications that could be addressed only briefly in this article. However, based on these three categories, future comparative studies can now explore the different characteristics and implications in empirical settings. It is, for instance, an open question what possibilities mere memberships provide in comparison to member–contributorship, and further empirical studies will be necessary.

Reframing membership as an important but not necessarily constitutive decision premise has important implications for the understanding of organizations in modern systems theory. In particular, I assert that this theoretical move reduces the definition of organization to its essential core, that is, understanding organizations as social systems that consist of decision communications, and only of decision communications. Taking this definition seriously means that a social system does not necessarily need to decide that certain persons enjoy the right to participate in decisions. As soon as a social system monopolizes decisions as its main mode of operation, we can treat it as an organization—whether it has decided memberships or not.

This insight also has implications for the understanding of organizational boundaries. So far, in modern systems theory, the boundaries of an organization were seen as defined by membership (Luhmann, 1995a, p. 196; Kühl, 2013). Luhmann argued that through membership 'the system demarcates itself through the distinction between belonging/not belonging' (Luhmann, 2018, p. 81). Dropping membership as a constitutive element of organization directly effects this definition of organizational boundaries.

In contrast to the standard view, I argue that although members might serve as a helpful marker in identifying organizational boundaries, they do not constitute the boundary as such. Because an organization consists only of communication, the members themselves—that is, certain persons—are environment to the organization (cf. Barnard, 1938), and, hence, the organizational boundaries can be understood only as communicative boundaries. An organization as a social system distinguishes itself from its environment when certain decisions connect to certain further decisions thereby excluding other communications as external. The boundary is constituted by the very decisions that connect to each other. These interconnected decisions are the internal side of the organization, while everything that is not part of this stream of interconnected decisions is external. Therefore, an organization does not necessarily need decided memberships to constitute an external boundary. Organizations can distinguish themselves from their environments even when non-members participate in the internal decision processes. Such a participation of non-members does not mean that an organization would not be able to recognize its own elements. Hence, the organizational boundary can be only a communication boundary that might rely on membership as a marker but cannot ultimately be defined by it.

Modern systems theory has been repeatedly identified as offering the potential to provide elaborate understandings of contemporary organizational and social developments and modern societal challenges (Apelt et al., 2017; Grothe-Hammer & Kohl, 2020; Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010). However, to unleash this potential, modern systems theory must first become capable of grasping new organizational forms—and so far, it has fallen short. In this respect, the theoretical shifts will allow modern systems theory to account for the whole spectrum of old and new organizational phenomena—including such new forms as hacker collectives, platform organizations, memberless activist groups—and make these available for systems-theoretical analyses. An open question in this respect is whether the occurrence of such forms of organizations that rely significantly on contributorship and refrain from deciding on membership is a new phenomenon at all. It could be possible that new forms of organization have made this form of affiliation more common but that there are other historical cases that can inform the concurrent debate or can be perhaps even better understood.

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