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# Toward a theory of social conflict<sup>1</sup>

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I

After an interval of almost fifty years, a theme has reappeared in sociology which has determined the origin of that discipline more than any other subject area. From Marx and Comte to Simmel and Sorel, social conflict, especially revolutions, was one of the central themes in social research. The same is true of many early Anglo-Saxon sociologists (although in their work the problem of revolution has been characteristically somewhat neglected), for example, the Webbs in England, Sumner in the United States. However, when Talcott Par-

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was translated by Anatol Rapaport, Mental Health Research Unit, University of Michigan.

The following presentation is an attempt to depict in a systematic form the fundamental ideas of my book *Soziale Klassen und Klassenkonflikt in der industriellen Gesellschaft* (Stuttgart, 1957). However, the presentation departs significantly in its organization and thematic scope from that given in my book: (1) whereas the book binds together theoretical considerations and empirical analysis, the present exposition is essentially limited to the theoretical aspects; (2) whereas in the book I have developed the theoretical orientations in a critical dialogue with other authors, particularly with Marx, the presentation in the following exposition is systematic. It need hardly be elaborated that much of what is expressly developed in the book could be only formally treated here and often with dogmatic brevity. Nevertheless, it may be noted that the present exposition, especially in the first and fourth sections, contains in certain respects formulations beyond the scope of the book.

sons in 1937 established a certain convergence in the sociological theories of Alfred Marshall, Émile Durkheim, Vilfredo Pareto, and Max Weber,<sup>2</sup> he no longer had in mind an analysis of social conflict; his was an attempt to solve the problem of integration of so-called "social systems" by an organon of interrelated categories. The new question was now "What holds societies together?"—no longer "What drives them on?" The influence of the Parsonian posing of the question on the more recent sociology (and by no means only on American sociology) can be hardly overrated. Thus it is possible that the revival of the study of social conflict in the last decades appears to many not so much a continuation of traditional research paths as a new thematic discovery—an instance of dialectic irony in the development of science.

At this time, approaches toward a systematic study of social conflict are still relatively isolated, compared with the innumerable works on social stratification or on structure and function of specific institutions, organizations, and societies. Still the thesis of a revival of the study of social conflict can be justified with regard to the works of Aron, Philip, Brinton, Kerr, Coser, Brinkmann, Geiger, Gluckmann, and others,<sup>3</sup> as

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Structure of Social Action* (New York, 1937; 2d ed., Glencoe, 1949).

<sup>3</sup> Raymond Aron, "Social Structure and the Ruling Class," in *Class Status and Power*, ed. Reinhard Bendix and Seymour Martin Lipset (London, 1954); André Philip, *Le Socialisme*

well as an attempt to determine a systematic locus and a specific framework for a theory of conflict in sociological analysis.

#### TYPES AND VARIETIES OF SOCIAL CONFLICT

To begin with a commonplace observation: The problem of conflict is no less complex than that of integration of societies. We now know that the attempt to reduce all actually occurring conflicts among social groups to a common principle, say that of classes, is sterile. It leads either to empty generalizations (such as "Every society experiences social conflicts") or to empirically unjustifiable oversimplifications (such as "The history of all societies so far has been a history of class struggles"). It seems advisable, first, to sort out and to classify the problems which are conceived under the general heading of "social conflict." Even a superficial reflection leads to the distinction of a series of types.

There are wars, and there are conflicts among political parties—evidently two different kinds of struggle. With regard to a given society, A, one could say there are *exogenous* conflicts brought upon or into A from the outside, and there are *endogenous* conflicts generated within A. Of these two categories, which, at least analytically, can be relatively precisely distinguished, there are again several types. Let us confine our

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*trali* (Paris, 1957); Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution* (2d ed.; New York, 1952); Clark Kerr, "Industrial Conflict and Its Mediation," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. XL, No. 3 (November, 1954); Lewis Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (London, 1956), and "Social Conflict and Social Change," *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. VIII, No. 3 (September, 1957); Carl Brinkmann, *Soziologische Theorie der Revolution* (Tübingen, 1948); Theodor Geiger, *Klassengesellschaft in Schmelztiegel* (Köln-Hagen, 1949); Max Gluckmann, *Custom and Conflict in Africa* (London, 1957).

attention for the moment—for reasons which will presently be given—to endogenous conflicts. Then further subdivisions are directly perceived: slaves versus freemen in Rome, Negroes versus whites in the United States, Protestants versus Catholics in the Netherlands, Flemings versus Walloons in Belgium, Conservatives versus Laborites in England, unions versus employers in many countries. All these are opposing groups in well-known conflicts. Perhaps each of these examples does not fall into a separate category; but certainly they cannot all be subsumed under a single type of social conflict. Whatever criterion one chooses for classification—for example, the objects of contention, the structural origin of the conflicting groups, the forms of conflict—several distinct types result.

#### THE LIMITS AND GOALS OF A THEORY OF SOCIAL CONFLICT

An ideal sociology cannot, in principle, exclude any of these categories and types of conflict from analysis. Nevertheless, the types mentioned do not all have the same importance for sociological analysis. A brief recollection of the intent of a sociological theory of conflict reveals that the contribution of sociology to the understanding of conflict (as well as the contribution of conflict to the social process) is in specific instances greater in some cases than in others.

The intent of a sociological theory of conflict is to overcome the predominately arbitrary nature of unexplained historical events by deriving these events from social structural elements—in other words, to explain certain processes by prognostic connections. Certainly it is important to describe the conflict between workers and employers purely as such; but it is more important to produce a proof that such a conflict is based on certain social structural arrangements and hence is bound to arise wherever such

structural arrangements are given. Thus it is the task of sociology to derive conflicts from specific social structures and not to relegate these conflicts to psychological variables ("aggressiveness") or to descriptive-historical ones (the influx of Negroes into the United States) or to chance.

In the sense of strict sociological analysis, conflicts can be considered explained if they can be shown to arise from the structure of social positions independently of the orientation of populations and of historical *dei ex machina*. This is necessarily a very abstract formulation; instead of elaborating it, it may be advisable to illustrate its meaning by the following treatment of a form of social conflict. First, however, let us draw a consequence of this formulation which will help to make our problem more precise.

Since the recognition of the inadequacy of the Marxist-Leninist theory of imperialism, the explanation of exogenous conflicts on the basis of the structure of a given society is once again an open problem, the treatment of which has scarcely begun. It seems, moreover, that the explanation of exogenous conflicts<sup>4</sup> by the tools of sociological structure analysis is possible only in a metaphorical sense—namely, only in case the entire societies (or less comprehensive "social systems") are taken to be the units of a new structure,<sup>5</sup> that is, when C is analyzed in terms of the structure of its elements A and B without consideration of the inner structure of A and B. On these grounds it seems sensible to exclude exogenous conflict for the time being from a theory of social conflicts.

On the other hand, the above-mentioned examples of endogenous conflict, if consid-

<sup>4</sup> We recall here that a conflict which, from the point of view of Society A, appears as exogenous is represented from another point of view as a conflict between two societies or systems, A and B.

ered from the point of view of their structural significance, fall into two groups. On the one hand, they point to conflicts which arise only in specific societies on the basis of special historical conditions (Negroes or whites in the United States, Protestants versus Catholics in the Netherlands; Flemings versus Walloons in Belgium); on the other hand, however, there are conflicts which can be understood as expressions of general structural features of societies, or of societies in the same stage of development (Conservatives versus Laborites in England; unions versus employers' associations).<sup>6</sup> Certainly in both cases an analysis leading to generalization is possible: a theory of minority or religious conflict is as meaningful as that of class conflict. Nevertheless, their respective weights within a general theory of society are evidently distinguishable. It is not surprising that the "classical" theory of conflict—I mean here primarily the class theory of conflict—has, above all, called attention to such social frictions which can be derived from the structure of societies independently of structurally incidental historical data.

The following approaches toward a theory of conflict also relate themselves to conflicts based on structure. So far, we are by no means considering a general theory of

<sup>5</sup> Talcott Parsons and the political scientist David Easton (*The Political System* [New York, 1953]) are currently working on an attempt to analyze international conflicts by means of a model in which entire societies, such as the United States and the U.S.S.R., appear as elements and are treated as if they had no inner structure. This procedure is methodologically entirely legitimate. It remains to be seen what results it can achieve and how it may be connected to the analysis of intrasocietal conflicts.

<sup>6</sup> The conflict between free men and slaves in ancient Rome possibly belongs to this second group, although not on the same level of generality.

social conflict, although I would undertake to defend the assertion that we are dealing here with one of the most important, if not the most important, type of social conflict. However important as problems of social conflict St. Bartholomew's Night, Crystal Night, and Little Rock may be, the French Revolution and the British General Strike of 1926 and June 17, 1953, seem to me more germane for structural analysis. To put it less dramatically, the sociological theory of conflict would do well to confine itself for the time being to an explanation of the frictions between the rulers and the ruled in given social structural organizations.

## II

The explanation of motion requires two separate attacks. We must know the point of departure and the direction of motion or, better yet, the moving force. No theory of social change or of conflict can forego the description of the structural entity which undergoes change or within which conflicts occur. Such a description is offered by the integration theory of society. However, it is erroneous to assume that a description of how the elements of a structure are put together into a stable whole offers, as such, a point of departure for a structural analysis of conflict and change. So far, the claim of the so-called "structural-functional" theory of modern sociology to the status of a general theory of society is demonstrably unjustified.

### TOWARD A CRITIQUE OF A STRUCTURAL-FUNCTIONAL THEORY

This critique has been led in recent times repeatedly, most effectively by D. Lockwood.<sup>7</sup> It is based on a relatively simple argument. As long as we orient our analysis toward the question as to how the elements of a society are combined into a co-ordinated functioning whole, then the

representation of society as a social system is the last point of reference. We are therefore faced with the task of determining certain associations, institutions, or processes within this balanced whole, that is—in Merton's definition—of determining the intentional or unintentional consequences of these associations for the functioning and the preservation of the system. In this way, we come to contentions such as "the educational system functions as a mechanism of assigning social positions," or "religion functions as an agent of integrating dominant values." The majority of sociological investigations in the last years moves in this area of analysis.

However, such an approach leads to difficulties, if we put a question of a different sort. What was the function of the English trade unions in the General Strike of 1926? What was the function of the construction worker in Stalin Allee on June 17, 1953? Without doubt, it can be argued in many cases that militant trade unions or opposition political groups and parties also contribute to the functioning of the existing system.<sup>8</sup> But even when this is the case—and in the two cases cited it would be difficult to establish this—such a conclusion would say little about the role of the group in question. Moreover, it is clear that the intentional, as well as the unintentional, effects of such oppositional groups are in the contribution toward an abolition or destruction of the existing system. The structural-functional position has a comfortable

<sup>7</sup> David Lockwood, "Some Notes on 'The Social System,'" *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. VII, No. 2 (1956). Although Lockwood's argument leads to the same conclusion, it proceeds somewhat differently (cf. my *Social Classes and the Class Conflict*, pp. 159 ff.).

<sup>8</sup> This aspect of social conflict is, in fact, central in the analysis of Lewis Coser (continuing that of Simmel) in his work on the functions of social conflict (cf. n. 3).

label for such cases: they are "dysfunctional" organizations, institutions, or processes. But this designation again tells us less than nothing. It not only fails to explain the place of these things in the process but actually hinders such explanation by a terminology which seems to be congruent with the system but which, upon closer examination, reveals itself as a residual category. Whatever does not fit is conjured out of the world by word magic.

In every science, residual categories are a fruitful point of departure for new developments. It seems to me that a careful analysis of problems which the term "dysfunction" hides in the structural-functional theory automatically puts us on the trace of a meaningful sociological theory of conflict. At the same time, it offers a remarkable vantage point associated with an attempt of a scientific analysis of society.

#### TWO MODELS OF SOCIETY

If we extrapolate the analytical approaches of the structural-functional theory somewhat beyond their boundaries and investigate their implicit postulates, we can construct a model of society which lies at the base of this theory and determines its perspectives. The essential elements of this societal model are these:

1. Every society is a relatively persisting configuration of elements.<sup>9</sup>
2. Every society is a well-integrated configuration of elements.
3. Every element in a society contributes to its functioning.
4. Every society rests on the consensus of its members.

It should be clear that a theory based on this model does not lend itself to the explanation, not even the description, of the phenomena of social conflict and change. For this purpose, one needs a model which

takes the diametrically opposite position on all the four points above:

1. Every society is subjected at every moment to change: social change is ubiquitous.
2. Every society experiences at every moment social conflict: social conflict is ubiquitous.
3. Every element in a society contributes to its change.
4. Every society rests on constraint of some of its members by others.

The remarkable nature of our vantage point becomes evident when we examine the two groups of postulates with respect to their truth content, that is, if we ask ourselves which of the two models promises greater utility for cognition of reality. It appears that the juxtaposed pairs of postulates are in no way mutually exclusive with respect to social reality. It is impossible to decide by an empirical investigation which of the two models is more nearly correct; the postulates are not hypotheses. Moreover, it seems meaningful to say that both models are in a certain sense valid and analytically fruitful. Stability and change, integration and conflict, function and "dysfunction,"

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<sup>9</sup> There is much controversy over this implication of the structural-functional approach. Most functionalists deny that they make such an assumption. Indeed, assertions to the contrary are found in the works of Parsons, Merton, and others. Nevertheless, it can be shown that these assertions are, from the point of view of structural-functional theory, mere declarations. The notion of equilibrium and the concept of a system would have little sense if they did not make the assumption of stability of societies. However, two limitations are to be observed: (1) we have to do here (also in the implications which follow) not with a metaphysical postulate but rather with an assumption made for the purpose of analysis; and (2) stability does not mean statics in the sense of complete absence of processes within the "system."



consensus and constraint are, it would seem, two equally valid aspects of every imaginable society. They are dialectically separated and are exhaustive only in combination as a description of the social problems. Possibly a more general theory of society may be thought of which lifts the equi- validity of both models, the coexistence of the uncombinable, onto a higher level of generality. As long as we do not have such a theory, we must content ourselves with the finding that society presents a double aspect to the sociological understanding, each no better, no more valid, than the other. It follows that the criticism of the unap- plicability of the structural-functional theory for the analysis of conflict is directed only against a claim of generality of this theory but leaves untouched its competence with respect to the problem of integration. It follows, on the other hand, also that the theory of conflict and change is not a gen- eral theory. Comparisons between natural and social sciences always carry the danger of misunderstanding. However, it may be maintained, without attributing to this anal- ogy more than a logical meaning, that the situation of the sociologists is not unlike that of the physicists with respect to the theory of light. Just as the physicists can solve certain problems only by assuming the wave character of light and others, on the contrary, only by assuming a corpus- cular or quantum theory, so there are prob- lems of sociology which can be adequately attacked only with an integration theory and others which require a conflict theory for a meaningful analysis. Both theories can work extensively with the same categories, but they emphasize different aspects. While the integration theory likens a society to an ellipse, a rounded entity which incloses all of its elements, conflict theory sees society rather as a hyperbola which, it is true, has

the same foci but is open in many direc- tions and appears as a tension field of the determining forces.

#### THE TASKS OF A THEORY OF SOCIAL CONFLICT

The double aspect of society and the dialectics of the two types of sociological theory are in themselves a most fruitful object of reflection. Nevertheless, another problem seems to be more urgent. The theory of social integration has recently de- veloped to a flourishing state as the struc- tural-functional approach in ethnology and sociology. Our theory of conflict, however, is still in a very rudimentary state. It is an approach based on postulating ubiqui- tous social change and social conflict, the "dysfunctionality" of all the elements of so- cial structure, and the constraining char- acter of social unity. Our considerations put us in a position to formulate some require- ments of such a theory:

1. It should be a scientific theory (as is the theory of social integration), that is, it should be formulated with reference to a plausible and demonstrable explanation of empirical phenomena.

2. The elements of the theory should not contradict the conflict model of society.

3. The categories employed should, whenever possible, agree with those of the integration theory or at least correspond to them.

4. A conflict theory should enable us to derive social conflicts from structural arrangements and thus show these conflicts systematically generated.

5. It should account both for the mul- tiplicity of forms of conflict and for their degrees of intensity.

The last goal of a social theory is the explanation of social change. The integra- tion theory gives us a tool for determining

the point of departure of the process. To find the locus of the forces which drive the process and social change is the task of a theory of conflict. It must develop a model which makes understandable the structural origin of social conflict. This seems possible only if we understand conflicts as struggles among social groups, that is, if we make our task precise to the extent that it reduces to the structural analysis of conflicting groups. Under this supposition three questions come especially to the forefront, which conflict theory must answer:

1. How do conflicting groups arise from the structure of society?
2. What forms can the struggles among such groups assume?
3. How does the conflict among such groups effect a change in the social structures?

### III

Wherever men live together and lay foundations of forms of social organization, there are positions whose occupants have powers of command in certain contexts and over certain positions, and there are other positions whose occupants are subjected to such commands. The distinction between "up" and "down"—or, as the English say, "Them" and "Us"—is one of the fundamental experiences of most men in society,<sup>10</sup> and, moreover, it appears that this distinction is intimately connected with unequal distribution of power. The main thesis of the following attempt to construct a model for the structural analysis of conflict is that we should seek the structural origin of social conflict in the dominance relations

<sup>10</sup> Empirical corroborations for these generalizations are found in two significant publications of last year: Heinrich Popitz *et al.*, *Das Gesellschaftsbild des Arbeiters* ("The Worker's Image of Society") (Tübingen, 1957); Richard Hogart, *The Uses of Literacy* (London, 1957).

which prevail within certain units of social organization. For these units I will use Max Weber's concept of "imperatively co-ordinated group." The thesis is not new; it is found (however often with important modifications) in the formulation of many social scientists before and after Marx. But we shall make no attempt to trace the history of this thesis.

#### AUTHORITY AND AUTHORITY STRUCTURES

The concepts of power and authority are very complex ones. Whoever uses them is likely to be accused of lack of precision and of clarity to the extent that he tries to define them "exhaustively." Is the influence of a father on his children, the influence of an industrial combine on the government, or the influence of a demagogue on his followers an instance of an authority relation? Here, as in most other cases, it is basically not a question of a definition but rather a question of an "operational definition," as it is often called today: a method of determination which allows us to identify as such the state of affairs when we are actually confronted with it. However, for the purpose of analysis and identification, Weber's determination of authority is sufficient: "The likelihood that a command of a certain content will be obeyed by given persons"<sup>11</sup> This determination contains the following elements:

1. Authority denotes a relation of supra- and subordination.
2. The supra-ordinated side prescribes to the subordinated one certain behavior in the form of a command or a prohibition.
3. The supra-ordinated side has the right to make such prescriptions; authority is a legitimate relation of supra- and subordina-

<sup>11</sup> Max Weber, "Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft," in *Grundriss der Sozialökonomik*, III (3d ed.; Tübingen, 1947), 28.



tion; authority is not based on personal or situational chance effects but rather on an expectation associated with social position.

4. The right of authority is limited to certain contents and to specific persons.

5. Failure to obey the prescriptions is sanctioned; a legal system (or a system of quasi-legal customs) guards the effectiveness of authority.

This determination of authority makes possible the identification of a cabinet minister, an employer, and a party secretary as occupants of authority positions—in contrast to an industrial syndicate or a demagogue, neither of which satisfies condition 3 above.<sup>12</sup>

It is not the intention of our “definition” of authority to solve all analytical and empirical problems of this category.<sup>13</sup> In fact, the very first step of our model leads us deep into these problems: in each imperatively co-ordinated group, two aggregates can be distinguished: those which have

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<sup>12</sup> This third condition, that of legitimacy, denotes the distinction between power (as an actual command relationship) and authority (cf. Weber’s “Definitionen,” *op. cit.*).

<sup>13</sup> Thus it is clear that the phenomenon of authority is here deliberately treated unilaterally. The double aspect of society may be illustrated in this category, as in practically any other. Integration theory, too, treats of authority. However, this theory emphasizes not the polemical, conflict-generating aspect of this social relation but, on the contrary, the integrative, unifying aspect. Parsons is doubtless right when he says that authority “is the capacity to mobilize the resources of the society for the attainment of goals for which a general ‘public’ commitment has been made, or may be made. It is mobilization, above all, of the action of persons and groups, which is *binding* on them by virtue of their position in society” (“The Distribution of Power in American Society,” *World Politics*, X, No. 1 [October, 1957], 140). However, in a way C. Wright Mills, who is criticized by Parsons, is also right when he emphasizes, as we do, the “presumptive illegitimacy” and “dysfunctionality” of all authority.

only general (“civil”) basic rights and those which have authority rights over the former. In contrast to prestige and income, a continuum of gradual transition cannot be constructed for the distribution of authority. Rather, there is a clear dichotomy. Every position in an imperatively co-ordinated group can be recognized as belonging to one who dominates or one who is dominated. Sometimes, in view of the bureaucratic large-scale organization of modern societies—under the influence of the state—this assumption may at first sight seem problematic. However, a sharper analysis leaves no doubt that here also the split into the dominating and dominated is valid, even though in reality a considerable measure of differentiation is discernible among those in the dominating group.<sup>14</sup>

#### THE CONFLICT-THEORY MODEL

The dichotomy of social roles within imperatively co-ordinated groups,<sup>15</sup> the division into positive and negative dominance roles, is a fact of social structure. If and insofar as social conflicts can be referred to this factual situation, they are structurally explained. The model of analysis of social

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<sup>14</sup> The position of authority of the bureaucrat was already of concern to Max Weber and to many sociologists since. Here there seems to be indeed a differentiation of authority. However, it is a differentiation of a special kind. In modern bureaucratic administration, the exercise of authority has undergone to a certain degree a division of labor; hence the multiplicity of positions, distinguishable by the number of “assignable persons” and the scope of “specific content” to which authority privileges are attached. In the sense of our analysis, there can be no doubt that the entire bureaucracy belongs (at times!) to the ruling side.

<sup>15</sup> In what follows, I shall designate the roles to which the expectation of the exercise of authority is attached as “positive dominance roles” and, conversely, the roles without authority privileges as “negative dominance roles.”

conflict which is developed against a background of an assumption of such a dichotomy involves the following steps:

1. In every imperatively co-ordinated group, the carriers of positive and negative dominance roles determine two quasi-groups with opposite latent interests. We call them "quasi-groups" because we have to do here with mere aggregates, not organized units; we speak of "latent interests," because the opposition of outlook need not be conscious on this level; it may exist only in the form of expectations associated with certain positions. The opposition of interests has here a quite formal meaning, namely, the expectation that an interest in the preservation of the status quo is associated with the positive dominance roles and an interest in the change of the status quo is associated with the negative dominance roles.

2. The bearers of positive and negative dominance roles, that is, the members of the opposing quasi-groups, organize themselves into groups with manifest interests, unless certain empirically variable conditions (the condition of organization) intervene. Interest groups, in contrast to quasi-groups, are organized entities, such as parties, trade unions; the manifest interests are formulated programs and ideologies.

3. Interest groups which originate in this manner are in constant conflict concerned with the preservation or change in the status quo. The form and the intensity of the conflict are determined by empirically variable conditions (the conditions of conflict).

4. The conflict among interest groups in the sense of this model leads to changes in the structure of the social relations in question through changes in the dominance relations. The kind, the speed, and the depth of this development depend on empirically variable conditions (the conditions of structural change).

The intent of such a model is to delimit

a problem area, to identify the factors pertinent to it, to put them into order—that is, to propose fruitful questions—and at the same time to fix precisely their analytical focus. We have delimited our problem area by viewing social conflict as a conflict among groups which emerge from the authority structure of social organizations. We have identified pertinent factors in the conditions of organization, of conflict, and of change. Their order, however, can be expressed on the basis of the model in three functions: interest groups (for example, parties) are a function of conditions of organization if an imperatively co-ordinated group is given; specific forms of conflict (e.g., parliamentary debates) are a function of the conditions of conflict if the interest groups are given; specific forms of change (e.g., revolutions) are a function of the conditions of change if the conflict among interest groups is given. Thus the task of the theory of conflict turns out to be to identify the three sets of conditions and to determine as sharply as possible their respective weight—ideally, by quantitative measure.<sup>16</sup> The following remarks are hardly more than a tentative indication of the sorts of variables in question.

#### EMPIRICAL CONDITIONS OF SOCIAL CONFLICT

As far as the conditions of organization are concerned, three groups of factors come to mind. First, we have certain effective social conditions: for example, the possibility of communication among the members of the quasi-group and a certain method of recruitment into the quasi-groups. Next there are certain political conditions which

<sup>16</sup> By this remark is meant (1) a mathematical formulation of the functions, (2) a development of measurement scales for each of the conditions, and (3) the adjustment of the combined scales to groups of conditions.

must be fulfilled if interest groups are to emerge. Here, above all, a guaranty of freedom of coalition is important. Finally, certain technical conditions must be fulfilled: an organization must have material means, a founder, a leader, and an ideology.

Under conditions of conflict, two kinds are immediately conspicuous: the degree of social mobility of individuals (or of families) and the presence of effective mechanisms for regulating social conflicts. If we imagine a continuum of intensity of social conflict among interest groups, ranging from democratic debate to civil war, we may conjecture that the presence or absence of social mobility and of regulating mechanisms has considerable influence on the position of specific given conflicts on this continuum. Here, as with the other conditions, the determination of the exact weights of the factors is a task of empirical investigation.

Finally, a third group of conditions or variables determines the form and the extent of social structural changes which arise from the conflict of interest groups. Probably a relatively intimate connection exists between the intensity of the conflict and the change, that is, also between the conditions of conflict and of the structural changes. However, additional factors come into play, such as the capacity of the rulers to stay in power and the pressure potential of the dominated interest group. The sociology of revolutions and especially the unwritten sociology of uncompleted revolutions should contribute considerably to making these factors precise.

It need hardly be re-emphasized that these unsystematic observations can, as such, hardly lay a foundation of a theory of conflict. Nevertheless, we put ourselves in a position to ask meaningful questions both on the theoretical level and with respect to empirical problems. Each of the conditions mentioned offers a fruitful object of theo-

retically oriented investigations. And in the empirical sphere, the systematic association of factors in such an investigation redirects our questions from a haphazard search for *ad hoc* relations in the world of coincidences to a meaningful study of specific interdependencies, whose locus and meaning are fixed by a general perspective. By the nature of the subject, our exposition up to this point had to remain somewhat abstract in form.

In spite of the tentative nature of the above-mentioned frame of reference, it is nevertheless possible to test its resolving power on some empirical problems.

#### IV

Strictly speaking, every form of differentiated social organization may also be described as an imperatively co-ordinated group—a state and an industrial enterprise, a chess club and a university, a party and a church. Thus, strictly speaking, the theory of conflict is applicable to all these cases. Our decision to single out two of these imperatively co-ordinated groups—the state and the industrial enterprise—for purposes of analysis is, in principle, arbitrary, although the special empirical meaning of these two forms of social organization in so-called industrialized society certainly needs no justification. In its application to the analysis of industrial and political conflict, the theory of conflict comes very near to the positions of the traditional, especially Marxist, theory of classes. At the same time, it becomes evident that the theory of classes is only a special case of the theory of conflict.

#### SOCIAL CONFLICT IN INDUSTRIAL ENTERPRISE

The approach to a theory of social conflict taken here can be tellingly illustrated in the example of an industrial enterprise. An in-

dustrial enterprise is, among other things,<sup>17</sup> an imperatively co-ordinated group. It contains positions with which are associated an expectation and a right of exercising authority and other positions whose occupants are subjected to authority. There are managers of many grades, and there are workers. The authority of managers is institutionalized and legitimate. It is guaranteed by legalistic and quasi-legalistic sanctions (disciplinary fines, demotion, dismissal, etc.). A conflict of (latent) interests between managers and workers is thus structurally unavoidable. Therefore, we can formulate the assumption that, from these quasi-groups, interest groups emerge as soon as the conditions of organization (communication within the quasi-groups, regulated recruiting into the quasi-groups, freedom of coalition, leaders and ideologies, technical means) are on hand. The emerging interest groups are employers' associations and trade unions. The conflict between these interest groups varies in its intensity in direct relation to the conditions of conflict, especially to the degree of mobility from one group to another and to the presence of effective mechanisms for regulating conflicts (channels for collective bargaining, arbitration institutions, etc.). This conflict leads—either through negotiations or through strikes—finally to changes in the structure of industrial organizations and in the position of the involved groups.

This sort of analysis evidently tells us little that we already do not know; it seems, after decades of industrial conflict, almost trivial. Therefore, I have expressly designated it as an illustration of conflict theory. Neverthe-

<sup>17</sup> It should be recalled that the description of a social organization as an imperatively co-ordinated group is not exhaustive, nor should it be so. Rather, this description singles out for analysis one aspect of social organizations. For this reason, the statement "This social organization is an imperatively co-ordinated group" is not a tautology.

less, even this illustration is not entirely trivial when we realize two of its implications: if conflict theory is useful, then it follows that industrial conflict exists regardless of whether the managers are owners-entrepreneurs or whether they are agents elected by bodies of stockholders, or whether they are government officials; that is, relationships of ownership in principle do not affect either the existence or the intensity of industrial conflicts. Furthermore, it follows that industrial conflict is present even if the complete system of its regulation has been realized. Regulation influences, it is true, the intensity of the conflict, but no mechanism is imaginable which abolishes conflicts altogether. Consequences of this sort suggested by applications of conflict theory are by no means trivial. In the face of two burning problems of sociological analysis, this assertion should be justified, at least in outline.

#### THE PROBLEM OF CO-DETERMINATION

It is now evident that co-determination in the German coal and steel industry has not led to the abolition, not even to alleviation, of industrial conflict. On the other hand, it is not to be doubted that all the involved groups expected that co-determination would bring such a result about. How can we explain this discrepancy? Under the assumptions and in the light of conflict theory, an explanation is indeed possible: industrial organization is an imperatively co-ordinated group. Social conflicts between the bearers of positive and negative dominance roles are unavoidable in it. Co-determination means, above all, the elevation of workers' representatives into management positions, that is, a change of certain persons from negative to positive dominance positions (*Aufsichtsrat*, *Arbeitsdirektor*). These changes leave the authority structure of industrial organization as a structure of positions with command functions unchanged. Co-determina-

tion has created a new authority position, that of the *Arbeitsdirektor*; but it has not abolished the contrast between up and down, nor could it abolish it. It bypasses the possibilities of effective regulation of social contradictions and thus has neither annihilated industrial conflict nor contributed to its regulation.

Conflict theory allows us to go a step farther and to formulate the assumption that co-determination not only is useless as an instrument for regulating industrial conflicts but also, in the long run, threatens to lead to a sharpening of such conflicts. In this connection, I do not have in mind the much-discussed problem of "loyalty conflict" with which the *Arbeitsdirektor* is faced.<sup>18</sup> Structurally, another fact is more important. The *Arbeitsdirektor* and the *Aufsichtsratsvertreter* in the industries affected by the right of co-determination are defined as the representatives of the employees. Their rise to responsible positions appears, therefore, as a rise of a new group to authority. However, this group consists not of the totality of workers but of workers' representatives. Thus a situation results that those whose task it is to represent the interests of the occupants of negative dominant positions in an industrial enterprise have themselves become occu-

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<sup>18</sup> The social role of the *Arbeitsdirektor* is complex in the legal formulation of its rights and duties. The law prescribes that the *Arbeitsdirektor* (1) is a representative of the employees, or should not be appointed to the *Aufsichtsrat* (supervisory council) against the votes of the workers' representatives; (2) shall have equal rights and duties with the other members of the board of directors of the enterprise. However, the conflict which results from the incompatible role expectations is less a sociological structural one than a psychological problem for the individual *Arbeitsdirektor*. For, structurally, only the latter expectation can hold realistically: the *Arbeitsdirektor* is, first and foremost, a member of the board of directors, that is, of the management.

pants of positive dominance positions and, as such, stand, as a result of structural necessity, on the other side of the barrier that separates up from down. Somewhat pointedly expressed: not only has co-determination failed to make industrial conflict milder, but it has at the same time robbed the occupants of the negative dominance positions of their representation, that is, it has blocked a channel of expression of the conflict. There is thus the danger that the existing latent conflict will create new, completely unregulated, forms of expression and will assume more radical forms when the representatives of the workers perceive their task as representatives of interests in an unambiguous and radical manner.<sup>19</sup>

The above analysis, because of its almost superficial brevity, is wide open to many kinds of critical objections. Therefore, we shall break it off at this point, with the assertion that a strict and detailed application of conflict theory to the problem of co-determination enables us to make the indicated assumptions sufficiently precise that they can be subjected to empirical tests. The same holds for a second problem of outstanding actual importance, which will be briefly analyzed here from the perspective of conflict theory: the problem of conflict and of change in totalitarian states.

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<sup>19</sup> The dogmatic brevity of the present analysis can give rise to misunderstandings. What is meant here is that conflict theory offers a conclusion to the effect that the intensity of social conflict is at a minimum where the conflict as such is taken seriously and is pursued most energetically, for example, in United States industry. Conversely, all attempts to erase the lines of conflict by institutions such as co-determination threaten, contrary to their intent, to sharpen conflicts. The oft repeated question of Sombart, "Why is there no socialism in the United States?" finds an answer not in the vague notion of the "American way of life" but in the generally positive value attached to conflict in the United States.



THE PROBLEM OF THE  
TOTALITARIAN STATE

Since June 17, 1953, and with greater certainty since the events in Hungary and Poland in the autumn of 1956, we know that social conflict (and social change!) have by no means disappeared in the totalitarian states. Conflict theory raises this knowledge to the status of law. The state, that is, society in its political aspect, is an imperatively co-ordinated group. There are in it mere citizens (voters) and occupants of positions equipped with command opportunities. Therefore, political conflict is a structural fact of society under every imaginable condition. This conflict can assume mild or severe forms; it can even disappear for limited periods from the field of vision of a superficial observer; but it cannot be abolished. Now one of the aspects of a totalitarian state is an attempt to suppress the opposition, that is, to suppress social conflict. The question then arises, against the background of conflict theory, In which way do social frictions become manifest under such circumstances? We can analyze totalitarian states from the point of view of conditions of organization of interest groups—that of conflict and of structural change—and hope to arrive in this way at meaningful explanations of historical events and to testable predictions. Again it is possible here to make only a few indications.

Let us begin—for reasons which will soon become evident—with the conditions of conflict. The intensity of social conflicts depends on the measure of social mobility and on the presence of mechanisms for regulating the conflicts. Both mobility and regulation can be present in totalitarian states. One could argue that the regular “purges” in Communist states—that is, a replacement of the bearers of authority—function as a guaranty of stability (in the sense of allevi-

ating social conflicts). In the same way the systematic requirement of discussion with the aim of deciding the political “platforms” within and outside the state party may be an effective mechanism of regulation.<sup>20</sup> Still there seems to be an inherent tendency in most totalitarian states to isolate socially the leadership layer and to prevent discussions, that is, to disregard the mechanisms for regulating conflicts. If this is the case, social conflicts threaten to increase in potential intensity and to take on a revolutionary character.

From the point of view of conditions of structural change, this means that political conflicts in totalitarian states aim more and more at sudden replacement of the ruling class. The important variable which determines the probability of realizing a radical change is the resistance of the rulers to the pressures making for change. Perhaps it is meaningful to make the empirical generalization that this resistance does increase to a certain degree with increasing pressure, but then gives way to a relatively speedy dissolution and so promotes change.

Central for the analysis of conflicts in totalitarian states, however, is our third set of conditions (first, as listed in the theory): the condition of organization. It follows in a way from the “definition” of a totalitarian state that there are no conditions in it for the organization of opposing interest groups. More specifically, although the social and technical conditions are often present, the political conditions are lacking;<sup>21</sup> there is no freedom of coalition. At this point, the re-

<sup>20</sup> I would suspect the significant part of an explanation of the remarkable stability of the U.S.S.R. in arguments of this sort (and not in the assumption of the unlimited power of totalitarian leaders).

<sup>21</sup> For certain technical conditions of organization, this is valid only within limits. Thus the liquidation of potential leaders of the opposition

sistance of the German Eastern Zone government to free elections becomes clear, as does the general threat of violent, possibly revolutionary, conflict in totalitarian states. When—as expressly in Hungary or virtually on June 17, 1953 in Berlin—an opportunity for organization occurs to latent conflict groups, the total edifice of the totalitarian state collapses. Moreover, it seems very probable that this possibility can become realized at any moment in every totalitarian state.<sup>22</sup> In modern totalitarian societies founded on ideological state parties, there is a constant danger from the point of view

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is a central component of totalitarian authority. In a way, both the East German and the Hungarian events can be taken as corroborations of the effectiveness of this policy.

<sup>22</sup> Relevant here is the well-known slight decrease of pressure which seems to precede every revolution. Insofar, for example, as a certain relaxation of police control makes possible only an *ad hoc* organization, the emergence of open conflict becomes acute.

of the rulers that a permitted organization, even the state party itself, may become the root of an opposition movement and of revolutionary conflict.

Again our analysis will be broken off at the point where it promises testable results. It was not the intent of this discussion to treat exhaustively some empirical problem. Rather, we wanted to show that conflict theory puts us in a position to formulate more sharply urgent problems of empirical investigation, to bring within our grasp unexplained events, to see what is known from additional points of view, and to transform tentative questions into a systematic search—that is, to do precisely what a scientific theory should accomplish. It needs hardly to be said explicitly that conflict theory in the form here presented is almost as incomplete as the two empirical analyses indicated in this section. In spite of all progress, the theory of social conflict is still more a challenge to the sociologist than a result of his researches.