**CC3: Lewis Coser**

Introduction

Two opposing theoretical formulations namely Functionalism and Conflict theory have dominated sociological theorising. These have been projected as mutually exclusive, both in terms of central assumptions as also in terms of their background/ideological assumptions. Functionalism has been seen as a conservative, status-quoist theory, whereas Conflict theory is a radical, progressive one. The debate over which of the two orientations is the appropriate one has led to a convergence between them. The works of Coser and Dahrendorf indicate it. It is particularly so when they examine the phenomenon of social stratification. Both draw heavily upon Marx, but tend to diverge from him. It must be mentioned that Coser's focus was on the study of positive consequences of group conflict with class conflict being a mere variant. On the other hand class and class conflict are the primary focus of Dahrendorf.

Function of Conflict

1. In order to devise a theory of social conflict, Coser explores the ideas set forth by Georg Simmel in his classical work, Conflict. This essay analyzes conflict in terms of interactive processes and depicts conflict as "a form of socialization." [Coser, p. 31] No group can be entirely harmonious, for then it would lack process and structure. Group formation is a result of both association and dissociation, so that both conflict and cooperation serve a social function. Some certain degree of conflict is an essential element in group formation.
2. Coser discusses how conflict serves the function of establishing and maintaining group identities. According to Simmel, conflict sets boundaries between groups by strengthening group consciousness and awareness of separateness from other groups. Reciprocal antagonisms between groups preserve social divisions and systems of stratification. These reciprocal "repulsions" both establish the identity of the various groups within the system and also help to maintain the overall social system. For example, conflict between Indian castes both establish the distinctiveness of the various groups and insure the stability of the overall social structure. The distinction between one's own group and "outsiders" is established in and through conflict. This includes conflicts between classes, nations, ethnic groups, and political parties. In social structures where there is a substantial amount of mobility, the mutual hostility among groups is accompanied by the lower strata's attraction to the higher strata. Such structures tend to provide many occasions for conflict.
3. Coser describes some positive functions served by the expression of hostility in conflict. Simmel maintains that such expression maintains relationships under conditions of stress and thereby prevents group dissolution. Conflict "clears the air" and allows for the free behavioural expression of hostile dispositions. This might be thought of as a "safety-valve theory" of conflict, according to which conflict serves as an outlet for hostilities so that relationships between antagonists can be maintained. However, here Simmel fails to distinguish between conflict behaviour and hostile feelings. While conflict changes the terms of a relationship, mere hostility need not have such effects. In addition, hostility may sometimes be deflected onto "substitute objects" rather than the primary sources of opposition.
4. Coser next discusses a distinction between "realistic" conflict and "unrealistic" conflict. Conflicts that arise from frustration of specific demands and are pursued as a means toward an end are "realistic" conflicts. Non-realistic conflicts, on the other hand, result from one antagonist's need to release tension. Here conflict is an end in itself, and need not be oriented toward the attainment of specific results. Realistic conflict, on the other hand, will cease if the actor can find alternative ways to achieve his end. Means other than conflict are potentially available. This distinction shows why we should not explain conflict entirely in terms of tension release.
5. Hostile impulses do not suffice to account for social conflict, and not every conflict is accompanied by aggressiveness. Conflict simply presupposes a relationship and social interaction. Nevertheless, realistic conflicts are often accompanied by distorted sentiments. In this case, there is a distinction between realistic reasons for engaging in conflict on the one hand, and the emotional energies involved during the conflict on the other.
6. In relationships in which individuals are very deeply involved, both feelings of attraction as well as feelings of hostility are likely to arise. The closer the relationship, the greater the affective investment, and the more potential there is for ambivalence. Coser suggests that the closer the relationship, the more intense the conflict. Given the ambivalence described above, it is understandable that conflict would arouse very strong feelings and lead to intense conflict.
7. The more frequent the interaction, the more occasions for hostile interaction. However, frequent occasions for conflict do not necessarily result in frequent conflicts. This is because the closeness of relationship and the strong mutual attachment may induce parties to avoid conflict. However, conflict also has the potential to re-establish unity. Much depends on the issues that are at stake in conflict: a distinction between conflicts over basic matters of principle and conflicts over less central issues. Insofar as conflict resolves tension between antagonists it can serve to integrate relationships. However, conflict tends to serve this positive function only when it concerns interests or values that do not contradict the basic assumptions upon which the relation is founded.
8. The absence of conflict within a relationship cannot serve as an index of its underlying stability. In fact, parties are more likely to express their hostile feelings if they feel secure and stable in the relationship. The fact that a relationship is free of conflict cannot be taken to indicate that it is free from potentially disruptive elements. In fact, if parties' relationship is stable, conflicts are likely to arise between them. For this reason, occurrence of conflict can actually indicate the strength and stability of a relationship. Conflict can serve as a balancing mechanism.
9. Coser also discusses the impact that conflict with out-groups has on the structure of in-groups. First, he considers the idea that conflict with outside groups tends to increase internal cohesion. Coser suggests that whether increase in centralization or despotism likewise results depends on the character of the conflict and the type of group. Social systems that lack solidarity are likely to disintegrate in the face of conflict with outside groups. In some cases, groups may actually search for or invent enemies in an effort to maintain unity and internal cohesion.
10. Coser makes a distinction between two types of conflict: that in which the goal is personal and subjective, and that in which the matter in contention has an impersonal, objective aspect. He notes Simmel's claim that objectified struggles, which go beyond personal issues, are likely to be more severe and radical. These are conflicts in which parties understand themselves as representatives of collectives or groups, fighting not for themselves, but rather for the goals and ideals of the group.
11. There are also cases where the very act of entering into conflict establishes relationships where none previously existed. Conflict can lead to the formation of coalitions and associations between previously unrelated parties. If several parties face a common opponent, bonds tend to develop between them. This can lead to the formation of new groups or result in instrumental associations in the face of a common threat.

In conclusion, Coser suggests that conflict tends to be dysfunctional only for social structures in which there is insufficient toleration or institutionalization of conflict. Highly intense conflicts that threaten to "tear apart" society tend to arise only in rigid social structures. Thus, what threatens social structures is not conflict as such, but rather the rigid character of those structures.