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**abstract** Numerous approaches in the social sciences either refuse to consider or minimize the importance of conflict in community, or else replace it with a Spencerian vision of the social struggle. Between these two extremes there is considerable space for us to consider conflict as a relationship; this is what differentiates it from modes of behaviour involving war and rupture. Sociology suggests different ways of differentiating various modes of social conflict. The question is not only theoretical. It is also empirical and historical: have we not moved, in a certain number of countries at least, from the industrial era dominated by a structural social conflict in which the working-class movement confronted the masters of labour, to a new era dominated by other types of conflict with distinctly more cultural orientations? Whatever the type of analysis, the very concept of conflict must be clearly distinguished from that of crisis, even if materially the two coexist in social reality.

**keywords** action ♦ class struggle ♦ crisis ♦ social conflict ♦ social movements ♦ violence

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## Is social conflict central to social life?

Numerous approaches in the social sciences consider that society constitutes an entity or a whole and emphasize its political unity, which may often be represented by the state, and its cultural and historical unity, to which the idea of nation frequently refers. These approaches also focus on the community constituted by a society, the social bond, the integration of its members and their socialization. They may also describe society as an entity consisting of stratified social classes with the possibility of upward or downward social mobility. The specificity of these various approaches is to minimize or fail to acknowledge conflict, in other words the antagonistic relationship between two or several actors. In their most extreme and most ideological variants, these approaches go as far as reducing social life to the quest for 'harmony' as we can see in some of the texts influenced by Confucianism in present-day Chinese sociology.

Other approaches, on the contrary, place struggle at the centre of the analysis of social life. The most radical of these suggest Social-Darwinist or Spencerian representations. Some, while not necessarily taking this path, have no hesitation in developing the idea of conflict between ethnic groups or races, as

does Ludwig Gumplowicz (1883), who spoke of the 'struggle of the races'.

By refusing to adopt either of these two types of vision, at least in their most extreme versions, by choosing to remain at a distance both from the approaches which refuse to acknowledge or which minimize conflict and those which valorize competition and the struggle for life, it is possible to locate a relatively diversified sociological tradition which endeavours to give considerable space to the concept of conflict. This approach enabled Randall Collins, 'the strongest contemporary advocate of conflict theory' (Anderson, 2007: 662), to speak of a 'conflict tradition' which extends from Machiavelli and Hobbes to Marx and Weber (Collins, 1975). He considers that Machiavelli and Hobbes led the way by focusing on struggles for power. Marx, according to Randall Collins, suggested a set of principles which were to be the foundation of a 'conflict theory of stratification' – a statement which is open to discussion. While Marx did on occasion describe society as being composed of a stratified stack of social classes (as many as seven of them in *The Class Struggles in France* – in which Marx lists the financial aristocracy, the financial bourgeoisie,

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the industrial bourgeoisie, the petty bourgeoisie, the peasantry, the proletariat and the lumpenproletariat), he mainly spoke about the class struggle and a central conflict specific to capitalist societies in which the proletariat composed of workers confronts the masters of labour.

The idea of social stratification defines society as a juxtaposition of social strata. It tells us nothing about the possibility of a conflictual relationship between them. It is far from the idea of antagonism, or conflict, and much closer to that of upward or downward social mobility with individuals being defined in function of their belonging to a social stratum and of their remaining in or leaving this stratum for either a higher or a lower one. It is nevertheless possible to go from the idea of stratification to that of conflict by considering that the concept of stratification expresses that of conflict and that behind the social strata one finds actors caught up in relations of domination. Thus the Marxist sociology (Poulantzas, 1977) of the 1960s and 1970s sometimes described actual societies by considering different social strata – a process which refers to a conception in terms of stratification – while at the same time analysing the situation of a specific stratum, for example the petty bourgeoisie, in the conflictual polarization between the working class and capital.

Max Weber, once again according to Randall Collins, also stressed the existence of multiple divisions of social class and focused on the control of the material means of violence.

The sociological literature of the 1960s and 1970s frequently contrasted the concepts of conflict in Marx with those in Weber. Thus Marx focused on the specifically social conflict – the class struggle central to society – whereas Weber tended to focus more on other forms of struggle, for example on religious or ethnic ones. Marx is interested in the ownership of the means of production and the exploitation of the working class, whereas Weber tends to be interested in the bureaucracy and the rationalization of society. Marx thinks it is quite conceivable that when the emancipation of the proletariat is ensured society will be rid of conflict, whereas Weber is sceptical and does not believe in the disappearance of conflict, etc.

Some approaches therefore consider that the degree of integration of a society depends on the capacity to prevent or minimize social conflict, whereas others, like Marx, postulate that, on the contrary, conflict constitutes the driving force of social life. Marx considers that the history of societies in general is that of the class struggle and, while he is primarily interested in industrial societies, his mode of approach is equally valid for trading or peasant

societies: as Marx wrote in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) ‘The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.’

Most of the social thinkers who deal with conflict make of it a category which includes normative dimensions or which include a value judgement. On one hand, some, while not denying its existence or being blind to its empirical or historical reality, see therein a negative element or pathology. This is the case in particular for Talcott Parsons and for many other sociologists whether or not they are in his functionalist tradition: Lewis Coser wrote, ‘Parsons was led to view conflict as having primarily disruptive, dissociating and dysfunctional consequences. Parsons considers conflict primarily a “disease” ’ (Coser, 1956: 21). It is equally permissible to think that one of the founding fathers of sociology, Emile Durkheim, was more aware of the disrupting dimensions of conflict than of its capacity to contribute to progress or social integration. On the other hand, other sociologists make of conflict, if not a positive element, a factor for progress and dynamic action, at least a normal form of social life, a type of interaction ensuring change or yet again the working of society.

This remark enables us to be more specific about the markers which define the space of the concept of conflict. At one extreme, the space for conflict is restricted and judged in negative terms by those who, from Emile Durkheim to Talcott Parsons, are interested in society defined primarily as an integrated set of norms, roles and values. At the other extreme, when society is analysed as the outcome, by definition ever changing, of competition and merciless struggles ending in natural selection, there is rather more space for forms of predation, violence, civil war or rupture than for conflict – the ideas of Herbert Spencer or Social Darwinism are not part of a theory of social conflict.

An author who is particularly important here is Georg Simmel, who, with this theme of conflict, had a profound influence on American sociology whether it be on Robert Park and those who are known as the Chicago School of sociologists, or, later, Lewis Coser, who used it to put forward a functionalist theory of conflict and to underline its various functions and positive values: for Lewis Coser, conflict ensured the maintenance of a group, its cohesion within its own boundaries and prevented certain of its members from leaving: he wrote, it ‘may contribute to the maintenance, adjustment or adaptation of social relationships and social structures’ (Coser, 1956: 51).

Georg Simmel proposed an original analysis of conflict since, on the one hand, he situates it at the centre of social life and, on the other hand, he sees

therein a fundamental source of unity of society and he even valorizes it by explaining that it contributes to the socialization of individuals and the regulation of collective life: 'If ... conflict has once broken out, it is in reality the way to remove the dualism and to arrive at some form of unity' (Simmel, 1903: 490).

The idea of conflict can be associated with that of power and, in the last resort, with that of coercion. It then becomes distinct from the idea of sociability. It signifies that human beings are sociable but are also capable of opposing one another and struggling with one another. From this point of view, conflict is what happens when the interests of individuals or of groups are antagonistic and they are in conflict for status or power. In this instance, the participants in the conflict are sensitive to emotions, a theme recently renewed by Randall Collins, for whom violence tends to be a form of emotional communication (Collins, 2008), while at the same time being capable of rationally pursuing their aims. They mobilize resources in an attempt to achieve their aims but this does not mean that 'that Man to Man is an arrant Wolfe', as in Hobbes's description of nature – '*homo homini lupus*'; they are involved in rationales of relationship and not of destruction or survival.

### Conflict as a relationship

Conflict is not the implacable confrontation between enemies; it is not a zero sum game in which one party's gains are the other party's losses. It is a relationship between opponents who share some cultural references – in Simmel's words, 'it is a conjunction of elements, an opposition, which belongs with the combination under one higher conception' (Simmel, 1903: 490). Nor is conflict synonymous with crisis which constitutes a situation in which individuals and groups react and is not a relationship between actors.

Conflict is not necessarily violent but it may be, and the relations between violence and conflict demand clarification: in certain phases a conflict may include violent aspects but if the violence lasts and takes hold or else if it loses all capacity to be primarily instrumental and therefore controlled and limited – in these instances it necessarily erodes the conflict and impels it towards other rationales, of pure rupture, war and terrorism. Moreover, the violence specific to a conflict, even if extreme, does not prevent the coexistence of tacit forms of agreement. In a classic study for example, Thomas Schelling (1960) points out that messages which convey an appeal for an end to the conflict can take on the appearance of brutal and extreme violence – the

atomic bombs dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima by the American airforce during the Second World War were also messages which indicated that a degree of communication, therefore a relationship, was not excluded; for other illustrations of this phenomenon, see Gambetta (2009), or Jankowsky (1991), which demonstrate how violent street gangs tacitly send messages to rival gangs, to police or to politicians.

For there to be conflict, there must be a sphere of action, within which the relationship between opponents can take shape – in other words there must be at one and the same time unity of the sphere of action and autonomy of the actors. This sphere of action, this shared space, has the effect of ensuring that the issues at stake in the conflict are recognized by the actors who oppose one another, struggling to control the same resources, the same values or the same power. Georg Simmel (1903) gives a good illustration of this specific point by recounting how a conflict arose between the workers and the Berlin breweries in 1894 – the workers boycotted the breweries. Despite this intense struggle 'which was carried on by both sides with extraordinary energy, yet without any personal offensiveness on either side toward the other. ... Indeed, two of the party leaders, in the midst of the struggle, published their opinions about it in the same journal. They agreed in their formulation of the objective facts, and disagreed in a partisan spirit only in the practical conclusions drawn from the facts.'

More systematically, there can only be a conflict if three elements are present: a sphere of action or a set of issues which are the same for all the actors, what Alain Touraine (1974) has called a principle of totality; a principle of opposition according to which each is defined in relation to an opponent; and a principle of identity in which each party defines itself. From this point of view, speaking in the case of industrial society about social classes and class relationships from a perspective which could be described as Marxist is to speak in terms of conflict. There is effectively a principle of totality since each of the actors present intends for their part to run society and control the use made of production; there is a principle of opposition since proletariat and capital each consider the other to be an adversary (and not an enemy who would have to be physically suppressed); and a principle of identity because it is permissible to think that each individual is likely to be aware of their position in society, as a worker for some and as a boss or an entrepreneur for others – a point which is widely discussed in particular by important Marxist thinkers like Georg Lukacs (1923).

The sociology of conflict, while it must envisage

the possibilities of escalation but also those of bureaucratization or of the resort to a juridical process, may also easily extend to the political philosophy of consensus, that is to say, to the endeavour to resolve conflict. Without going as far back as Plato, who attempts, in *The Republic*, to define the way in which the ideal state could eliminate all conflict, let us turn instead to Jürgen Habermas (2003), who endeavoured to outline the conditions for an ethics of democratic discussion. On another level, we witness the setting-up of a practical activity known as 'conflict resolution', which constitutes an immense academic and professional field aimed at eliminating the sources of conflict in all sorts of spheres: in family, professional, political and geopolitical life, with attempts at managing intercultural differences and engaging in 'peace building'. The specificity of the majority of these endeavours is to attempt to implicate a third party so as to create a mediation between the parties in conflict, enabling a way out of the conflict by negotiation, helping to construct communities which are aware of themselves by using pedagogical means, by revealing the interest which the parties share in achieving a 'win-win' solution, etc. (Bercovitch et al., 2009; Deutsch et al., 2000; Sandole et al., 2009). Furthermore, the sociology of conflict has much to gain from taking note of the countless studies in social psychology which study, in particular, the way in which groups in opposition become stronger or weaker in the conflict, the interaction between the 'in-group' and the 'out-group'; the studies by Henri Tajfel (1981), for example, are particularly interesting. But the evolution of a conflict does not necessarily mean its harmonious resolution in varying degrees, there may also be an increase in tendencies to violence. And a conflict may very well be subject to different phases, some being closer to negotiated resolution and others characterized by escalation.

These remarks lead us to be more specific about what is not social conflict.

Conflict is not war, which refers, in the terminology of Carl Schmitt, to a world made uniquely of friends and enemies and in which communities are united by an external opposition to other communities likely to constitute a radical threat for one another – the complete opposite of a relation in which one can discuss and negotiate. But war may constitute the extension or the perversion of a social conflict, the means, for example, for a ruling class or for a dominant economic class to transform their difficulties in dealing with social problems and internal politics into mobilization against an external enemy. Throughout the Cold War, the ideologists of the two camps presented their opposition in terms of class conflict, the United States being described in the

Soviet camp as an imperialist power in the service of capitalism, and the Soviet Union appearing symmetrically for the American camp as an enemy of the progress which a capitalist economy is supposed to provide.

Nor is conflict easily reduced to a notion of competition, a theme discussed at length by Georg Simmel, for whom competition constitutes a particular form of conflict/consensus and, often, an indirect or parallel conflict in which the actors have the same aim, share the same issues at stake but without directly or necessarily opposing one another. Competition, however, does not imply any social relationship and this is why one can admit, in the last resort, that it operates in spaces which are distinct from those of social conflict.

### The different types of social conflict

Sociology, directly or indirectly, sets out several ways of distinguishing various types or modalities of social conflict. Some are based on a hierarchy ranging from conflicts with the highest level of issues at stake to those with the lowest. Thus in perspectives which owe a lot to Karl Marx, the class struggle appears for numerous social thinkers as the highest form of conflict – the one which is the most central and most determining. From this point of view, many actual struggles may include this dimension, along with others at the same time; they may, for example, combine demands from a low level project, demands aimed at modifying the relationship between contribution and recompense in favour of the protagonists of the action, a pressure of political type for a change in the legislation on a specific point, for example, and the assertion of a historical ambition or a utopia which, as such, are directly related to the class struggle. Similarly, and still from this point of view, it is possible to interpret some forms of behaviour in the light of the hypothesis of a class struggle even if they only include weak aspects and seem to be operating primarily at another level – political, or perhaps organizational, for example.

Thus, when the sociology of organizations recognized the importance of conflict in the 1960s and 1970s, it was fairly distinctly divided between three major approaches. On one hand, a Marxist viewpoint, or a Marxist tendency, saw in the organizational conflicts within a firm, an institution, an administration, a hospital, etc., the translation of an expression, at a restricted level, of the major opposition between the working-class movement and the masters of labour, and endeavoured finally to perceive, behind the tensions internal to the organization concerned, a historical vision, the appeal to

another type of society. On the other hand, in a perspective which owes more to Max Weber, sociologists like Ralph Dahrendorf (1959), while retaining the vocabulary of social class, have concentrated primarily on analysing the way in which authority, in an organization, structures the relations between leaders and those they lead. In this perspective, social conflicts bring into play the distribution of authority, they lead to its modification or, on the contrary, to maintaining it. Finally, a vast literature deals with organizational conflicts by establishing themselves at their level and making no attempt to consider the dimensions which might go beyond them. In this third perspective, conflict does not challenge the more general orientations of collective life, those which mean that beyond belonging to an organization, beyond their interests, individuals and groups can be defined by their struggle for control, for the command of accumulation, for the direction of production, for the definition of the cultural and cognitive models and may recognize themselves in counter-projects.

There is no reason to decide a priori between these sets of approaches, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In practice, organizational conflict in itself does not necessarily lead to the structuring of wider or bigger social relationships; obviously this does not exclude the possibility of the conflict being major, arousing strong internal tensions, and possibly being set in the context of a project or a utopia going as far as to challenge the general type of society.

A second way of distinguishing between various types of conflicts consists in focusing not so much on their level or their relative importance but on the main headings of meanings of each of them. Our primary aim here, in a perspective which owes a lot to Max Weber, is to refuse the idea of a primacy and almost a monopoly of the class struggle, and therefore of a specifically social conception of the conflict which at this point is located in labour relations and in production, to bring to the forefront the existence of religious, cultural, ethnic, or even racial, conflicts.

This poses an important theoretical problem: if the concept of conflict implies the existence of a shared sphere, of a space in which the protagonists are likely to speak to one another and negotiate, what happens in instances where antagonistic relation is implied? Is it possible to resort to the shared space if it is a question of tensions between cultural, religious, ethnic or even racialized entities? For when the identities which define entities of this sort cease to be social, *strictu sensu*, that is to say when they are no longer associated with work, income, the access to consumerism, housing, education, etc., they then rapidly imply a non-relation, the absence of a shared

sphere, and of any possibility of negotiation or discussion. Cultural, religious, ethnic or racial belonging is not really negotiable, it is not something to be discussed, individuals are either inside or outside (we shall leave to one side here the discussion about the sociological relevance of the vocabulary of ethnic group and race, categories which are always liable to open the way to racism). While there may be considerable diversity in modalities of contact, or even of coexistence between identities, the hypothesis of a controlled, antagonistic relationship quickly gives way to the realities of war, violent forms of behaviour or rupture, if it is a question for these identities of their relationship with the outside world and to the realities of the quest for cohesion and purity in their midst. In this sense, conflict is far from the call for the greatest possible distance of the group from other groups and the quest for its homogeneity. It cannot be confused with xenophobia and racism even if, in the concrete experience of the actors in conflict, tendencies of this sort can be observed. This is why the idea of ethnic or racial conflict is so open to doubt, even if it does underlie numerous research studies, some of which have become 'classical' or reference works (Horowitz, 1985; Van den Berghe, 1965). This family of 'conflicts' constitutes in fact non-social relationships, non-relationships; it is based on, or leads to practices of rejection, exclusion, segregation or discrimination from which the society in question emerges not by negotiations or discussions between 'races' or 'ethnic groups' but instead by surpassing itself in a way which the American President Barack Obama has described as 'post racial'. The 'conflict' here, in democracies at least, is not 'racial', it is not between 'races' or 'ethnic groups'; instead, it opposes those who intend to put an end to racism and discrimination and those who tolerate, accept or even profit from these practices.

A third mode of approach consists in considering that in a society, the main conflicts are aimed at state power, the access to the political system and power. Politics constitutes one of the preferred spheres of conflict, especially when politics are representative and the actors are the expression of social, cultural, religious, ethnic or other forces. It is in the first instance the location where the two modes of sociological analysis which have just been described have to be combined. On the one hand, political representation is organized in function of the relative weight of demands and social expectations (which refers to the first of these two modes of approach) and of the hierarchy of conflicts which exists in the society in question. For example in industrial societies, the conflict opposing the working-class movement to the masters of labour can be found in the structure of political parties, the left representing the

workers and the right the masters of labour – even if studies in electoral sociology or yet again the analysis of Seymour Martin Lipset (1959) on the authoritarianism of the working class have often challenged the over-simplified idea of a direct correspondence between the social conflict and political representation. On the other hand, political representation is not selective and does not take into consideration all the realities which may exist be they social, *stricto sensu*, but also cultural, religious or ethnic. The sociology known as that of ‘mobilization of resources’ (Oberschall, 1996; Tilly, 1978), which developed in the United States as from the 1960s in a general political context in which it was a question precisely of rediscovering the conflict in American history and society, gives preference to this political level and therefore to the idea that through their mobilization, the main aim of the actors which it studies is to accede to this level, to stay there and to increase their relative influence. This is why it is interested primarily in the calculations or the strategies of actors in conflict, in their capacity to mobilize money, networks and forms of solidarity with a view to achieving their aims.

Finally, politics constitutes in itself a conflictual space within which actors struggle not only because they represent forces or social, cultural, religious or other interests, but in function of specific rationales of action with, it is permissible to think, a degree of autonomy in relation to other spheres or levels of community life. But we should note that this point has always been a subject for discussion in the social and political sciences, the idea of an autonomy, even relative, of politics being rejected by those who make of the state and of the interplay of political actors and parties the direct expression of demands and economic expectations. For example, from this point of view, and in the well-known words of Friedrich Engels, the state is said to constitute the managing board of the bourgeoisie and not an entity capable of pursuing its own interests.

### The place of class conflict

The place of social conflict in sociology is highly variable in time and space and in the first instance is a function of the realities themselves. In certain contexts, the specifically social conflict, which, in industrial societies, is rooted in work and the relations of production and extends to redistribution or consumption or urban space, occupies a prominent position and gives rise to numerous research studies and important sociological discussions. This was the case in particular in several countries in Europe during the 30 years consecutive to the end of the Second

World War, when reconstruction and development revealed a powerful working class with trade unions and political parties playing a considerable role. During the same period, American sociology gave less space to social conflict, among other reasons due to the fact that it was not as acute as in Europe, at least in relation to other issues, beginning with the question of civil rights. Generally speaking, if in the United States a tradition illustrated in particular by Robert Park, as Lewis Coser recalls in the introduction to *The Functions of Social Conflict*, did endeavour to make of social conflict a central theme, borne in particular by projects for reform, until the mid-1960s the intellectual domination of Parsonian functionalism was indicative of the weakness of approaches valorizing conflict. This lasted until the point at which new struggles once again gave it an appreciable place, at the same signifying, as Alvin Gouldner (1970) wrote, ‘the crisis of Western sociology’ – that is to say, of Parsonian sociology. But these struggles, after the movement for civil rights in the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, were not specifically working class; they were more political – against the war in Vietnam, or aiming to put an end to racial segregation – and counter-cultural, or yet again student based, rather than ‘social’ in the classical sense of the adjective. The fact remains that the rise of ‘conflict sociology’ in the United States, in particular with Reinhard Bendix (1966), is correlated with the decline of Parsonian-style functionalism; Joas and Knödl (2009) in Chapter VIII, ‘Conflict sociology and conflict theory’, observe that ‘Conflicts were in fact never *central* for Parsons and his followers’. Similarly in the United Kingdom, the sociological theory of conflict, as developed by authors such as John Rex or David Lockwood, is fraught with strong criticism of Parsons (Joas and Knödl, 2009).

Sociology is still relatively undeveloped in Africa and Asia and has had little to say about the conflicts in these continents in the post-Second World War period. More generally speaking, the social sciences, with social anthropology in the lead, while being aware of the existence of conflicts the most decisive of which were anti-colonialist or anti-imperialist, with at times a revolutionary content, and while being perfectly aware of the ethnic and racial divisions which might be expressed, at that point had little to say about social conflict for the non-western world. It was as if a decidedly ethnocentric division of labour finally made sociology the social science of developed countries and left the rest of the world to be studied by other disciplines. Elsewhere the forms of behaviour in struggles seemed to be dominated by rupture and radicalism, there was little space for the construction of social conflicts in the sense that we

have described above and, in consequence, very little space for a sociology of conflict. On the whole, the situation was the same in Latin America, where revolutionary ideologies and guerrilla violence were a greater source of inspiration for sociological research than the quest for democracy and the setting-up of conditions which would promote social conflict – an issue nevertheless well perceived by researchers such as the Brazilian Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who were then to participate in the democratic ending of the dictatorships.

Throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, societies where it had been possible and legitimate to speak of class conflict and the working-class movement began to emerge from the classical industrial age. Throughout this period, the forms of organization of labour evolved considerably, Taylorist factories where workers were subjected to 'scientific' modes of management and organization of production gave way to other types of work, such as the 'McDonaldization' analysed by George Ritzer (1993), flexibility, 'participative' management and the outsourcing of activities which till then had been ensured internally. By then capitalism had undergone profound changes, as Richard Sennett (2005), for example, demonstrates. Contrary to a rather superficial idea, workers had not disappeared but they had lost their capacity for community existence and collective action, as well as their centrality and visibility as such. From this point on we witness the historical decline of the central conflict which opposed workers to capital and shaped all community life, informing politics, the coherence of the social fabric and intellectual discussion. Neoliberalism had apparently swept the board, totally eliminating classical class conflicts. As from the end of the 1960s, some sociologists spoke of 'post-industrial society' (Bell, 1973; Touraine, 1969); these two sociologists both used the phrase 'post-industrial society', but for each it had a different meaning: for Daniel Bell it meant the extension of industrial society, while for Alain Touraine it denotes a change in type of society. A little later others used the term 'post-modernity' (François Lyotard [1979] for example) and the end of grand narratives, while others, or the same, described the entry of society into an era of generalized individualism and therefore into a world devoid of social conflicts.

In this context, the major conflict of the industrial age tended, if not to disappear, at least to lose its centrality, to the point that today the expression 'the class struggle' seems outdated, even if some sociologists of labour stand by its importance (Arrighi et al., 2005). However, some people have endeavoured to continue to prolong its existence artificially, first in leftist thinking then in extreme-left terrorism, so

widespread in Italy and observable in several western societies (Wieviorka, 1988). At the same time, the social question assumed a new aspect, and the heir to the classical theme of relations of production which enabled the conflict to be considered on the basis of working-class exploitation in work was a series of new questions which left little space for conflict. Sociologists have considered dualization in the labour market, and beyond that, in society with its dramatic consequences for the vulnerability of wage-earners, social exclusion and the increase in inequality and injustice, without really linking these themes to the idea of social conflict. Class conflict gave way to new formulations of what are known as social problems – marginality, urban violence, the underclass (a concept hotly debated), unemployment, etc. At the same time, the political parties most associated with the idea of the class struggle, the communists, but also social-democrats either disappeared or experienced considerable difficulties and the trade unions lost their strength and their mobilizing capacity.

## The new social conflicts

However, contrary to the predictions of those who supported the idea of generalized individualism eliminating any significant form of conflict, as from the end of the 1960s, new struggles, or old ones revived, delineated a new landscape of social conflictuality. Regionalist movements, demanding to 'live and work at home', student movements challenging the working and orientations of the university, and therefore of the production and dissemination of knowledge, women's movements, ecological and anti-nuclear protests – all these actors were analysed as from the 1970s by what is referred to as the mobilization of resources school of sociology as social movements endeavouring to assert their presence in the political sphere (Della Porta and Diani, 1999). Alain Touraine and his school interpreted these situations as emblematic of the protest figure of social conflicts marking the entry into a new, post-industrial era (Touraine, 1978).

In these new conflicts the cultural dimensions are much more marked than in the conflicts which were the motive force in industrial societies. Their protagonists invent ways of living together or plead in favour of cultural values and changes. They have also sought another form of militantism and, for example, no longer accept the principle of deferred gratification which, in the industrial era, made of militant workers actors aiming at the creation of a 'better world tomorrow'. Their demands to be considered as individuals endowed with a personal

subjectivity are much more vociferous than heretofore; they want to choose to be involved on their own terms and to be able to leave when they want to. Here collective action in conflict does not exclude individualism.

As from the 1990s, these conflicts have taken a new turning as a result of their insertion in globalization. Their actors have gone beyond the traditional framework of the nation-state – in any event it no longer has a monopoly. They themselves have become ‘global’, leading protests at world level. Despite having been weakened after the attacks on 11 September 2001, the *altermondialist* protest movement nonetheless inaugurated an era of global conflicts characterized by the link between world dimensions and other national, or even local, dimensions. They have paved the way for the construction of a conflictual sphere, a space for struggle with its issues (the actors intended to contribute to the creation of ‘another world’); their weakness has been due to the difficulties they have had in defining their adversary – the multinationals? The capitalists? The United States as an imperial power? The major international organizations like the IMF or the World Bank? Finally, some of these ‘new social conflicts’ have been borne along by collective actors who demand recognition of the historical past from which their ancestors suffered and the injustices from which they consider they suffer still today, in particular as a result of racism and discrimination. For example, they demand the recognition of genocide, mass murders, the slave trade, slavery, the eradication of their culture, and denounce, sometimes in one and the same movement, the way in which they are maltreated in the society in which they live. These actors, who often oppose their memories to the official history, emphasize historical and cultural demands; their difficulty, as above, is the construction of spaces for conflictual relationships. They tend to present themselves as situated in a position of competition – an aspect which is well demonstrated in a study by Jean-Michel Chaumont (1996) with the explicit title ‘Competition between victims’. Thenceforth new issues for discussion have come to the fore, both in the social sciences and in political philosophy: for instance, what relationship is there between the social and the cultural spheres, the struggles against forms of inequality and social justice and those for recognition? There is an extremely interesting discussion of these issues in Frazer and Honneth (2003).

## Conflict and crisis

Conflict and crisis are two categories which are analytically distinct and, very generally speaking, it can be said that the space for conflict contracts when the space for crisis expands. But in practice conflict and crisis are also often mingled, in which case the behaviour of the actors refers moreover to both categories, and are constantly evolving. In a period of crisis, the conflictual relationship between actors breaks down; tendencies to rupture and even to violence develop as do also, in the last resort, discouragement, withdrawal and introspection. Thus, when the Solidarnosc movement was constituted in Poland when it was still communist in 1980, it began by constructing a conflict which included a mixture of specifically social (working-class), national and democratic dimensions. But, after a few months, the economic (lack of basic foodstuffs) and political (transformation of the regime into a military junta) crisis took hold of the movement and led to its break-up. Populist and nationalist tendencies appeared in its midst. Radicalization characterized both the protest actor and the authorities in power who put an end to the legal adventure of Solidarnosc with a military coup on 13 December 1981. To a large extent, the conflict had been replaced by the crisis.

The relations between crisis and conflict vary from one experience to another and, for one and the same experience, from one moment to another. Thus, the social conflicts through which a close relationship between the trade unions and the bosses was built up in Europe at the end of the First World War were deconstructed in the economic crisis of 1929, then, in some countries, by the rise of fascism. On the other hand, in the same period in the United States the response to the Great Depression gave rise to a policy, the New Deal, an integral part of which was widespread encouragement to the trade unions for which it was really a Golden Age.

The financial crisis which emerged in broad daylight all over the world in 2008 has brought in its wake considerable social and economic consequences and shed light on the shortcomings but also on the hopes for two types of action: on one hand, trade unions, conflictual actors at the heart of industrial society, appeared as weakened and not really capable of having an impact institutionally. On the other hand, ecological awareness, the appeal to sustainable development and environmentally friendly growth, for example, have played a role, timid to be true, in the schemas for emergence from the crisis, which rendered justice to the protest actors who, as from the 1970s, have brought these ideas to the forefront in conflictual mode.

The most impressive expression of the link between conflict and crisis is undoubtedly the revolution. A revolution is neither an extreme mode of conflict nor a pure crisis. The 1917 Russian revolution, for example, was the work of actors who claimed to be from the proletariat but the rise of the workers, despite it being limited, only had the far-reaching effects which we know because there was a crisis in the institutions and the state – this was something well understood by Lenin, for whom it was not the actor who was revolutionary but the situation.

The space for the sociology of social conflict is therefore not only limited by minimization, rejection, negation or the discrediting of what the conflict means, or by what we owe to Social Darwinism. It is also likely to be hampered by the dimensions which invade it, or the crisis which destructures or weakens it. Symmetrically, it is legitimate to think that the best way to respond to a crisis is to open up the way to conflict, and therefore to the formation and reinforcement of actors located in antagonistic relationships.

## Annotated further reading

- Collins R (1975) *Conflict Sociology: Toward an Explanatory Science*. New York, San Francisco and London: Academic Press.  
Randall Collins considers that sociology can become a 'successful science' on condition, in particular, that it follows the path of 'conflict perspective'. He defends the idea of a 'conflict theory' which moves away from Parsonian functionalism and which gives central importance to the thought of Max Weber, without neglecting the contribution of Karl Marx, and by taking into consideration numerous authors ranging from Machiavelli to Pareto.
- Coser LA (1956) *The Functions of Social Conflict*. London: The Free Press of Glencoe.  
In this book, which to a large extent adheres to the thinking of Georg Simmel, Lewis Coser sets out an approach which one is tempted to describe as a 'left-wing variant of functionalism'. He considers conflict to be useful and functional in the life of the community. It is a source of solidarity for groups in conflict; it reinforces social bonds, and contributes to the integration of society as a whole.
- Simmel G (1903) The sociology of conflict. *American Journal of Sociology* 9 (1903): 490–525.  
For Simmel, conflict has significance; it may constitute an important source of socialization for individuals; it enables society to recover its unity through the oppositions which compose it. It is the resolution of the tension between the contraries.
- Tilly C (1978) *From Mobilization to Revolution*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- For Charles Tilly, collective action serves to promote the shared interests of the people engaged therein and this is particularly the case if political conflict is involved, that is the struggle for political power between actors who mobilize resources to gain access thereto, extend their influence therein and weaken the influence of other actors. This book is based on specific and documented historical and contemporary illustrations and situates the orientations of Charles Tilly who combines Marxism and utilitarianism with other currents of thought.
- Touraine A (1974) *Production de la société*. Paris: Seuil. [*The Self-Production of Society* (1977) trans. Derek Coltman. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.]  
Alain Touraine opposes conflict, that is, a conflictual relationship, to crisis which leads to forms of behaviour as a reaction. He sets out three main levels of conflictuality: historicity, in which social actors are struggling for the control of the general orientations of community life; the institutional, that is, the level at which actors attempt to influence political decisions; and the level which he calls organizational, where the actors endeavour to improve in their favour the relationship between their contribution and their rewards in an organized system
- Wieviorka M (2005) *La Violence*. Paris: Hachette Littératures. [*Violence: A New Approach* (2009) trans. David Macey. Los Angeles and London: Sage.]  
Michel Wieviorka considers that the sphere of violence diminishes when the sphere of conflict increases and vice versa. He considers violence to be a rupture, the impossibility of negotiating, discussing, or acting within the framework of a relationship; it is to some extent the contrary of conflict, which is a form of relationship. In practice this does not exclude the possibility of violence finding a space in conflict.

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**résumé** De nombreuses approches en sciences sociales ou bien refusent ou minimisent l'importance du conflit dans la vie collective ou bien y substituent une vision spencérienne de la lutte sociale. Entre ces deux extrêmes, il existe un vaste espace pour envisager le conflit comme une relation, ce qui le distingue des conduites de guerre et de rupture. La sociologie propose diverses manières de distinguer des modalités variées de conflit social. La question n'est pas seulement théorique, elle est aussi empirique et historique : ne sommes-nous pas passés, dans un certain nombre de pays au moins, de l'ère industrielle dominée par un conflit social structurel opposant le mouvement ouvrier aux maîtres du travail à une ère nouvelle dominée par d'autres types de conflits aux orientations nettement plus culturelles? Quel que soit le type d'analyse, la notion même de conflit doit être nettement distinguée de celle de crise même si concrètement les deux coexistent dans la réalité sociale.

**mots-clés** action ♦ conflit social ♦ crise ♦ lutte de classes ♦ mouvements sociaux ♦ violence

**resumen** En las ciencias sociales, existen numerosos enfoques que rechazan o minimizan la importancia del conflicto en la vida colectiva, o que lo sustituyen por una visión spenceriana de la lucha social. Entre estos dos extremos, existe un vasto espacio para abordar el conflicto como una relación, lo cual lo distingue de conductas de guerra o de ruptura. La sociología propone distintas maneras de distinguir el conflicto social y de diferenciar sus modalidades. La cuestión no es solo teórica, sino también empírica e histórica: ¿no hemos pasado –al menos en algunos países– de una era industrial dominada por el conflicto social estructurado que oponía al movimiento obrero frente a los patrones, hacia una nueva era dominada por otro tipo de conflictos con orientaciones netamente culturales? En cualquier tipo de análisis, la noción misma de conflicto debe diferenciarse claramente de la noción de crisis, incluso si ambas coexisten concretamente en la realidad social.

**palabras clave** acción ♦ crisis ♦ conflicto social ♦ lucha de clases ♦ movimientos sociales ♦ violencia

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