

Simmel's Conflict Theory and Liberation Politics

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One of Simmel's more significant concepts was that of Conflict and the role that it plays in shaping how people interact with each other. Simmel explained conflict as serving two primary functions: unity, and discord. He describes it as essential, and in some cases, helpful for developing unity and societal progression (Simmel, 2015). In this paper, I want to explore how this understanding of conflict meshes with differing views of what is to be done about conflict between marginalized demographics and the broader population, as well as how marginalized groups experience conflict within themselves.

The context I want to explore this theory in is through liberation movements of subsets of the U.S. population. Notable examples such as the queer and black communities have long and visible liberation efforts spanning decades to centuries of American history. In their time, these movements have evolved and taken different forms, with different ideologies proposing different means of attaining social safety and power. Among these proposals was the idea of assimilation as theorized by Milton Gordon, which he describes as a process containing several steps which will eventually lead to the acceptance of a subgroup by their adoption of the broader society's characteristics (Gordon, 1961).

One example of this conceptualization of assimilation that is oft brought up is assimilation of queer communities into palatable political movements which gain power through bureaucratic means and by working within the existing system. Joseph DeFillipis brings up an example of this happening with organizations and policy which fought for marriage equality. "Making marriage the vehicle through which we disperse protections, rights and benefits perpetuates rather than diminishes discrimination against most LGBT people. Social workers

must fight to resist making marriage mandatory in order for a family to be recognized and protected as ‘legitimate’ and must work to expand, rather than eliminate, other forms of family recognition (e.g., domestic partnerships, civil unions, reciprocal beneficiaries) so that multiple family formations are protected” (DeFilippis, 2015). While making gay marriage was undoubtedly a legislative success and was positive social progress, DeFillipis writes about concern for working strictly within the bounds of marriage that are defined by the standards already set in place. While same-sex unions were legalized, it ultimately required queer relationships to conform to existing aesthetics to receive legal recognition and applicable benefits and saying that the job was done, when it leaves out other forms of nontraditional relationship.

Counter to this idea of assimilation is that of cultural pluralism- the continued existence of subcultures simultaneously within the broader culture. Kamila Ziółkowska-Weiss writes in her 2020 article on the topic of cultural pluralism in America that it “concerns the conscious effort of minority groups to maintain their ethnicity. A minority simultaneously works to gain political and economic influence in a dominant society. It is a category of the permanent existence of several cultural categories in society, combined with acceptance by the majority group and equality of minority groups” (Ziółkowska-Weiss, 2020). While this definition is helpful for framing, I believe that Alphonso Pinkney provides valuable insight in his contextualization of the topic within specifically black liberation movements. “Short of permanent black separation, it appears that black control of the institutions in the black community (i.e., temporary autonomy) is the minimum acceptable solution to the present racial crisis,” he writes in a 1969 paper about black assimilation, and further in his conclusion, “only through a pluralistic form of social organization will it be possible for black Americans to achieve self-determination and, with it, the power necessary to command the respect of their fellow citizens. For increasing numbers of

black people assimilation is neither desirable nor likely at the present time, and all evidence tends to support this position” (Pinkney, 1969). Pinkney suggests that while coexistence of different subcultures is good, he outright denounces assimilation and argues the point that equality can only be truly brought about when power is held by the communities that do not identify with the larger population.

I believe that we can use these understandings of assimilation and cultural pluralism to look at modern groups still seeking some form of liberation. One quality of conflict that Simmel outlined was its ability to act as an integrative force for a group. Among demographics seeking equality, I believe that it performs this function well. By identifying a shared struggle to be liberated from, people of shared identities find community through which they can organize and begin advocating for themselves in ways that are disruptive to the status quo. It happened with black and queer liberation movements through the Black Panther Party (Pinkney, 1969) and events such as Stonewall riots (DeFilippis, 2015), to name a few examples.

On the other hand, Simmel alludes to the concept of socially constructed categories being derived from existing conflict while writing about this aspect of conflict. He writes “Hostilities not only prevent boundaries within the group from gradually disappearing, so that these hostilities are often consciously cultivated to guarantee existing conditions. Beyond this, they also are of direct sociological fertility: often they provide classes and individuals with reciprocal positions which they would not find, or not find in the same way” (Simmel, 2015). An unfortunate flipside of this trait is that once a group is excluded upon socially constructed lines, it is difficult to dissolve those barriers, driving further hostility from the broader society toward marginalized groups demanding reform and justice, as seen with reactionary responses the recent

Black Lives Matter movement, and making liberation efforts through means such as gender abolition particularly difficult.

Another form of conflict that Simmel mentioned was conflict between intimates, which I believe in this context, bleeds into the prior form of conflict. Among liberation movements, even just acting as a member with vested interests in the movement, it's difficult to discuss these ideas out of fear that your ideas for liberation might conflict with somebody else's, breaking down group cohesion. While this is anecdotal, I have experienced this personally. As a trans person, I find myself biting my tongue in discussion on trans liberation with other queer people unless I have reason to believe they share my ideas. Not only to avoid conflict, but specifically to avoid conflict with somebody who ultimately shares some interest with me and has an identity that we can share experiences about. From this, popularity stems for the assimilationist ideology, to avoid ruffling feathers while still acting as a group with a shared identity.

Ultimately, I believe that Simmel's conflict theory holds up when applied to retrospectives and analyses of liberation movements yet to see their conclusion. The forms of conflict are at the very least still applicable, especially the in-group cohesive power that it can provide. While I think it might at times be overly optimistic about the utility that it provides, the theory does hold up and provides valuable insights in how equality and liberation might come about and what struggles they might face along the way.

References

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