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Conflict and Consensus

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Abstract

There are widely differing conceptions as to whether healthy social relations are, in essence, conflictual or consensual; such differences give rise to different approaches to finding peace and managing power. This article outlines the two broad schools of thought from conflict theory (in which society functions through competition) and consensus theory (which sees society developing through cooperation). It outlines the middle ground between them, as found by pluralism and agonism, before considering the ways in which assumptions vis-à-vis conflict and consensus are reflected in different models of democratic system and, in particular, different priorities for post-conflict recovery.

Introduction

Social and behavioral science has traditionally been dominated by the presumption that conflict and consensus are oppositional: conflict arises from incompatibility and consensus arises from compatibility. This is reflected in two differing schools of thought as to the fundamental nature of society and collective decision-making within it. One can be broadly described as ‘conflict theory,’ whose proponents view all social action largely within the terms of some form of antagonism or imbalance. The other we can categorize here as ‘consensus theory,’ which sees progress in society as only being possible through negotiation and cooperation. This article outlines the key features of each approach and the insights they offer before turning to examine different interpretations as to the relationship between consensus and peace. The article’s conclusion draws on a range of disciplines in its argument that, far from being polar opposites, conflict and consensus are two sides of the same coin: both conflict and consensus are equally essential to the functioning of society and group relations within it.

Nature of Conflict

Conflict is more than mere difference; it arises from a direct clash in the values or goals of protagonists. The presence of conflict thus infers none other than a win/lose outcome, in which one set of values or goals takes precedence over others. Power is at the heart of this dynamic; conflict is a struggle for power, i.e., the capacity to enact values or goals that annul those of others. And the process of articulating these values and goals among groups thus becomes, by necessity and definition, a political one. This may be seen in all forms of conflict in society. Class conflict, for example, centers on a fundamental inequality of power that spirals out from differential access to resources. Racial or ethnic conflict arises from a challenge to the values and goals of a dominant group that legitimates, and indeed benefits from, the subjugation of other racial or ethnic groups. Gender conflict also, in its simplest terms, is about an inequality of power as a consequence of the prevailing values and goals. Conflict in all these cases arises from group recognition of such a power imbalance and, in some cases, of collective movement to redress it. Into this mix come leadership, ideology, and mass opinion: all of which, again, indicate the centrality of power.

Conflict Theory

At the core of conflict theory – in its myriad of guises – is the belief that power (or, more specifically, an imbalance of power) is fundamental to social relations. Social interaction is thus, in essence, a struggle for control. Further to this, the decisions, identities, and perceptions arising from social exchange are imbued with conflict: ‘this way, not that,’ ‘us not them,’ ‘mine not yours.’ This merging of contradiction with power results in fundamental inequalities permeating throughout all society.

The major conflict theories center upon the most predominant forms of inequality. Marxism, for example, is founded on the premise that material inequality is the most significant of all power imbalances in society. Thus, struggle between classes (the laborers and the capitalists, as Marx (1867) would have it) is the overarching trope of western society, permeating into all forms of political, social, and economic behavior and outcomes. Where Marxian analysis differs from other conflict theories, however, is in its assertion that pervasive social conflict is primarily a by-product of the dominance of capitalism and thus will be eliminated when a more equitable form of exchange supplants the capitalist system.

The use of the notion of ‘conflict’ to explain the development of modern society reemerged in the 1950s, particularly in sociology departments in American universities. A sociologist, Wright Mills (1956), who applied conflict theory to advance understanding of the effects of social structures on individuals in the modern age, argued that the most influential public institutions are founded, not on agreement, but on conflict and competition. Their role ever after, he claimed, has been to perpetuate stark inequalities in resources and influence, with the result that social norms, values, interests, and decisions thus all come to be shaped by a powerful elite. Social order is thus ensured by coercion applied, through various means, by those with power. Society is consequently stratified, with access to advantage tightly restricted to groups already enjoying social privilege.
Whilst Mills shared Marx’s negative view of conflict, other theorists have argued that the pervasiveness of conflict at every level of society makes it, simply, essential to its functioning. A contemporary of Mills, Lewis Coser (1956), claimed that conflict must be recognized as a fundamental element of human relationships. He argued that the struggle for resources and recognition behind conflict serves the vital function of stimulating social innovation and change. Coser built on the work of Simmel (see below), particularly in his focus on the role of conflict in the creation and maintenance of group identities. Conflict acts as a means of socialization, through which mutual antagonism can enhance group solidarity and preserve social order. From this perspective, Coser critiqued overtly stable social relationships, rigid social structures, and processes of centralization for making violence and dissent more likely and more intense. Instead, he argued, social conflict itself should be tolerated as naturally functioning to raise awareness of common norms, instigate conformity to laws, and, over time, to generate new social structures. Such positive analysis of the role of conflict was extended in the next generation of US-based sociologists, among whom Randall Collins (1975) made the contribution of further elaborating the links between the macro-context and the micro-level of personal interaction and behavior. The constant struggle for status of each individual – and the conflict this entails – only makes sense if one appreciates the stratified environment in which (s)he lives. The conclusion he drew from this was that, whilst inequality and conflict predominate in modern society, competition and control are the drivers of stability and progress within it.

**Consensus Theory**

A contrasting approach to understanding social and political relations is to emphasize the vital role of consensus in society. Durkheim (1893) argued that the most interesting aspect of society is not its various dysfunctional elements but, rather, the fact that it functions at all – something that he attributes to the primacy of consensus in successful, healthy social relations. Social cohesion is founded on the interdependence of peoples, forged by social ties that range from kinship to the exchange of services. This functionalist interpretation sees all parts of society as working to uphold its solidarity and to minimize instability. Societies survive, Durkheim argued, by commitment to a common set of beliefs and practices – a form of ‘collective conscience’ thus functions as the bedrock of social order. Durkheim claimed that this solidarity was created in a ‘mechanical’ way in traditional societies, using rules to emphasize homogeneity and conformity; in more advanced, differentiated societies, he argued, rules instead regulate differences, necessitating a more ‘organic’ form of solidarity, or common purpose, between citizens. Durkheim’s thesis on solidarity was advanced by Finnish sociologist Erik Allardt (1970) in order to explain different reactions to modernization in the mid-twentieth century. He observed that, in order to function optimally, a modern society needed to have a highly developed division of labor together with a high degree of tolerance and pluralism. A weakness in Communist industrial societies, he therefore argued, lay not in the extent of the division of labor but in their imposition of conformity.

That said, theorists in this tradition have conceded that consensus does not naturally occur but is sometimes founded – and sustained – through coercion (Shils, 1972). Yet a process of socialization in modern societies modifies the behavior of individuals as they learn how to conform, or at least what is ‘acceptable,’ to the society in which they live. Interaction between individuals and groups can hence be premised on an understanding of how each can be reasonably expected to behave, i.e., the role each will perform (Parsons, 1951).

The nature of consensus changes with the nature of social communication and interaction. In the digital age, consensus may be achieved (or at least sought) through social media and online networks, for example, as much as through persuasive political rhetoric or interpersonal influence. Just as Simmel (1955[1908]) noted the effects of industrial capitalism and modernization on the nature of social organization, solidarity, and choice, so others, a century on, have sought to demonstrate the effects of the new information society on social bonds and relationships (Castells, 1996; Bauman, 2006). Even though the nature and style of communication between individuals has radically changed, however, their interdependence (or, to put it differently, their lack of freedom of choice) remains as strong as ever.

It is important to note at this point that consensus differs from consent in that the latter indicates that each person concerned offers his or her agreement, whereas there is an implicit assumption of majoritarianism in the concept of ‘consensus,’ given that only ‘general’ assent need be given. One might say that, rather than explicit and unanimous agreement as to the destination, consensus requires only shared sentiment as to the intended direction of travel.

Such consensual sentiment is maintained by a commonality that is underpinned by shared attachment to core sociopolitical institutions and acceptance of the norms and laws they promulgate. This is not to say that interests and identities do not diverge (this is inevitable in a plural society), but in cases of conflict between groups or individuals, adjudication takes place with reference to these ‘common’ interests and identities (as defined by laws and rules) and thus consensus ultimately prevails.

Given the close interdependence of society, social and individual needs are best addressed through cooperation rather than competition (which would merely risk generating new problems and divides). If shared norms, values, and institutions are the essence of a healthy society, consensus theorists conclude, conflict is almost pathological.

**Pluralism**

A tentative ‘bridge’ between conflict theory and consensus theory emerged in the mid-twentieth century in the form of pluralism. Pluralism recognizes that society is fragmented into diverse groups that compete for resources and have conflicting interests but acknowledges this does not automatically result in nontraversable gulfs crisscrossing society. Instead, Dahrendorf (1959) argued, advanced industrial society has found ways of
finding agreement between these social groups, despite their conflicting interests. Moreover, stability (and change) is realizable through institutionalizing this conflict, such as in the role of trade unions in processes of arbitration with employers. Dahrendorf thus allows for a functionalist emphasis on the role of social institutions whilst maintaining a focus on the differential levels of authority in any society and their effects on sustaining conflict.

Dahl (1967) brought pluralism into political analysis with his vision of society as a mass of competing interests. He argued that inequitable power and control was behind the construction of identities, capacities, and concerns of social groups. Social order is thus only achieved by finding a natural equilibrium among society’s component parts, with the state acting as an ‘honest broker’ as groups battle it out for influence and resources. And the nature of this struggle is neither overt conflict nor consensus, but endless bargaining and compromise.

Indeed, the politics of compromise has been advocated (by Bellamy, 1999) as the logical response to the plurality of identities, values, cultures, practices etc. in contemporary society. He argues that the sheer complexity of the sources and ties of social plurality today makes compromise a necessity, in that the dialogue it allows between incommensurable demands is itself a process to be welcomed and facilitated in liberal democracy.

Consensus versus Conflict?

The matter of what should be set in place after violent conflict remains, ironically, contentious in both theory and practice. The perennial debate as to whether the eradication of conflict is either possible or desirable is to the fore here. On the one hand, some claim that the resolution of conflict has to be at least the aspiration of peacemakers. Galtung (1969), for example, identifies the structural and cultural violence (such as poverty, oppression, or corruption) behind conflict as something to be challenged by the goal of ‘positive peace.’ Others argue that conflict is a necessary element of democracy and social exchange. For example, Foucault (2003) inverted Clausewitz’ dictum (on war as politics by other means) to define politics as war waged nonviolently by the state. Peace, thus, entails some form of conflictual power struggle. This is, to some degree, in line with the tradition of agonism, which seeks to acknowledge and foster the positive benefits of conflict for democratic society (Schaap, 2009).

Yet there is common ground to be found between these standpoints because conflict and consensus are not mutually exclusive. First, the traditional ‘criss-cross’ theory of conflict prevention assumes that the intersection of group identities and lines of transmission reduce the risk of violence (Galtung, 1966); but for conflict to be present at all, there needs to be at least a minimal degree of communication and connection between the competing parties. Second, all but few agree that deep differences among groups should be expressed politically rather than violently. But this gives rise to the problems of determining how best to give political voice to the groups concerned and the basis on which the power is divided between them.

Power-Sharing

Different conceptions as to the nature of society result in different constructions of the democratic state. The assumption in conflict theory that democracy centers on a constant struggle for dominance between divisions in society views adversarial politics as the most effective mode of decision-making. On the other hand, democratic institutions founded on the principle of consensus seek to incorporate a wide spectrum of opinions and to generate agreement rather than mere decisions. Consensus democracies, therefore, generally need a different electoral system to that in majoritarian systems, one which allows for proportional representation of the groups that constitute the population. This in turn requires greater political mobilization among a wide range of social clusters than in other forms of democracy.

The type of democratic institutions put in place after violent conflict are often intended to build-in agreement to executive and legislative decision-making and can thus be modeled on a form of consensus democracy. Consociationalism, a system originally conceived from the case of Dutch democracy as one proven capable of creating consensus across deep social cleavages, has been advocated as a model for power-sharing in other divided societies (Lijphart, 1977). Proponents of the consociational template for democracy after conflict argue that it guarantees all cleavage groups a proportionate input in policy and executive decision-making and that it minimizes the potential for systemic discrimination (Noel, 2005). Key features of consociationalism that lend themselves to finding post-conflict stability include executive power-sharing, (segmental) autonomy, commitment to proportionality, and veto rights (McCary and O’Leary, 2006). Cases of the application of consociationalism, or a version of it, after conflict include the system of government in Bosnia-Herzegovina established by the 1995 Dayton Agreement and Northern Ireland’s devolved executive after the 1998 Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement.

Consociationalism has had many critics, however, many of whom point to the elite focus of the model, in particular its reliance on power-holding elites to bring cooperation to the heart of the democratic institutions and for their lead to be willingly followed. Problems can arise for example, if the political elites are unable to bring their constituent supporters with them (as in the first years of the Northern Ireland executive), if deep inequalities between social groups remain unameliorated (as in Lebanon), or if the consociational constitution is repressively prescriptive (as in Fiji).

An alternative model of democracy after conflict is centripetal, i.e., one which seeks to concentrate political momentum toward the center ground between parties rather than allowing it to fester at the extremes. This model follows Horowitz (1985), who argued that intergroup cooperation ought to be made a condition for electoral success rather than, as with consociationalism, seen as a hoped-for outcome of power-sharing. Centripetalism also seeks to avoid the reification of ethnic identities that is seen as a danger in consociationalism by manufacturing incentives for interethnic and centrist politics (Reilly, 2001).
Peacebuilding with Consensus

Strong criticisms of both consociationalism and centripetalism are put forward by integrationists, who argue that such theories underestimate both the unifying potential of the state and the peacebuilding capacity of nonelite actors. The importance of local ownership of peace processes requires decision-making mechanisms that reach through to the grassroots. Donais (2012), for example, goes so far as to say that peacebuilding should be pinned to the concept of consensus-building, given its insinuation of inclusivity. Only by seeking consensus at all levels of the conflict-ridden society and at all stages of a peace process, it is implied, can that process be truly ‘owned’ and embedded and minimize the risks of further alienation or disaffection from the political sphere (Richmond, 2012). This approach is posed as an alternative to the dominant one of liberal peacebuilding, which is primarily a political, top-down process in which international support can be seen as more important than local endorsement. Consensus is thus coming, in twenty-first century peacebuilding, to be predominantly interpreted as a requirement to recognize and engage with the needs – and the wisdom – of the local population.

Conflict, Consensus, and Crisis

In the globalized world of the twenty-first century, there are new modes of conflict and consensus in developed societies. These came together in the case of the Occupy movement, which attempted to address stark extremes of social and economic inequality through new mechanisms of consensus-building. According to the slogan of the movement, 99% of the mass population was counterpoised against the powerful elite of 1%. As prime locations in international city centers in 2011–12 became occupied, the movement embodied innovation in finding consensus. In small urban protest occupations it used ancient means of human voices and coordinated hand signals (see Figure 1); via the internet, it used new forms of social media to advertise activities, disseminate ideas, and galvanize support locally and internationally. Thus, in the context of global economic crisis, social conflict reached new extremes and social consensus was sought by novel means.

The Occupy movement itself embodied differing conceptions as to whether contemporary social relations are, in essence, conflictual or consensual. As this article has outlined, such varying interpretations of the nature of society give rise to different approaches to the greatest and most enduring collective challenges, such as those of managing power and minimizing violence. Such assumptions also inform how we understand democracy to function and society to develop. But this article has also noted that recent scholarly contributions to the debate have sought to identify a middle ground between these positions, acknowledging not just the necessity of ‘both’ competition and cooperation in healthy social relations but also the possible complementarity between them. Conflict and consensus, it must be concluded, remain equally essential to contemporary society.

See also: Agonism; Conflict Mediation; Conflict and Conflict Resolution, Social Psychology of; Conflict: Organizational; Peace Processes; Peace; Social Protest.

Bibliography