

Coser L. A. *The functions of social conflict*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1956. 188 p.
[Brandeis University, Waltham, MA]

Taking issue with an approach to sociological theory that focuses prime attention on social harmony, adjustment, and common values and interests, this book argues that social conflicts are not only constitutive elements of social structures, but that they perform a number of positive functions within such structures. [The SSCI® indicates that this book has been cited in over 800 publications since 1966.]

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This book grew out of a doctoral dissertation undertaken at Columbia University under the direction of Robert K. Merton. I had originally intended to write a dissertation on the work of the great German sociologist Georg Simmel, but Merton felt that such an overall assessment of a scholar's work was not suitable for a dissertation. I then decided to narrow my concerns with Simmel's contributions by focusing on just one aspect of his work, his theory of social conflict as developed in the chapter "Der Streit" in his *Soziologie*.¹ Taking this chapter as my point of departure, I attempted to reformulate the theory in terms of the empirical and theoretical contributions made in the approximately 50 years that had elapsed after Simmel's publication.

What led me to this approach was a mixture of theoretical and existential motivations. The dissertation was written in the years of the ascendancy and dominance of Talcott Parsons's theories, and, while I was deeply impressed

by, *inter alia*, his great theoretical synthesis—*The Structure of Social Action*²—I found it one-sided in its concentration on common values, social harmony, and equilibrium. I saw my book as an attempt to redress the balance by focusing attention on the central importance of social conflicts in social structures and human affairs.

I arrived in the US in 1941 as a refugee from Hitler's Germany. I had grown up in Germany during the tormented and conflict-laden years of the Weimar Republic and had fled to France after Hitler came to power, living through the conflicts and upheavals of the 1930s. I spent the first year of the war in a French camp for enemy aliens. These experiences did not seem to jibe with the harmony models that predominated in American sociology in the 1940s and 1950s. The substance of my book was hence derived from both theoretical considerations and from my life experiences.

After the book was published in 1956, it received a generally favorable and fair reception from reviewers. I recall only one frankly negative review. But the impact of the book was slight during the 1950s. However, things began to change drastically in the 1960s. With the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement in the South and later in the North, with the student movements of the late 1960s, and with a variety of other protest movements, the book suddenly found a wide and appreciative audience. Unable to gain theoretical guidance for the understanding of these movements and conflicts in the work of Parsons and his disciples, researchers and students turned to my book—as well as to somewhat similar approaches in the works of Ralf Dahrendorf and of Max Gluckman.^{3,4} From then on, the book was widely read, used extensively in teaching and research, and considered a "modern classic."

[See references 5 and 6 for recent papers in this field.]

1. Simmel G. *Soziologie*. Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1908. 782 p. (Cited 120 times since 1966.)
2. Parsons T. *The structure of social action*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1949. 817 p. (Cited 275 times since 1966.)
3. Dahrendorf R. *Class and class conflict in industrial society*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1959. 336 p. (Cited 890 times since 1966.) [See also: Dahrendorf R. Citation Classic. (Smelser N J, comp.) *Contemporary classics in the social and behavioral sciences*. Philadelphia: ISI Press, 1987. p 299.]
4. Gluckman M. *Custom and conflict in Africa*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1959. 173 p.
5. Oberschall A R. Theories of social conflict. *Annu. Rev. Sociol.* 4:291-315, 1978.
6. Smelser N J. The persistence of positivism in American sociology. *Kolner Z. Soziol. Sozialpsychol.* 38:133-50, 1986.