Encyclopedia of Law & Society: American and Global Perspectives

Social Conflict

In a globalizing world, the questions of peace, security, and development become increasingly dependent on people's social trust. While political conflicts mainly concern the possession of government power or control over a certain territory, social conflicts are ultimately about questioning the legitimacy of the social order. However, which conflicts should be classified as the one or the other is often difficult to determine, and the boundaries between interstate conflict and intrastate (civil) war have also been blurred.

Conceptual Framework

Social conflicts involve an antagonism between different groups of people based on basic values, social status, political influence, or scarce resources. Because of perceived social inequalities, for example, on the basis of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, or any other identity group, the social order has lost part of its legitimacy. Every society is marked by social structures that determine which values and norms dominate, as well as how different resources are used and distributed. People create the social structures, and people can change them. Greatly simplified, social conflicts are thus about antagonisms between the individuals and groups that want to preserve the existing social order and those who want to change it. Conflicts are intimately linked to the question of *power*—that is, to the capacity of individuals or groups to realize their goals, satisfy their needs, and promote their interests. Often, it is a question not only of satisfying one's own needs but also of neutralizing and rendering harmless rival groups to eliminate future threats. Most social researchers see conflict as a normal state in the development of society and the constantly ongoing change of economic, political, and social power structures. In recent years, the significance of new social movements has grown. These movements consist of networks of individuals, groups, and organizations that, based on an imagined common identity and through collective protest actions, try to achieve or prevent social change.

Looking Back

The English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) was one of the first to develop a theory of human nature and, specifically, how the human inclination for conflict could be dealt with. In his classic work *Leviathan* (1651), he suggested that a "war of all against all" might be avoided through the establishment of a strong state. In exchange for the state's guarantee of security, citizens would give up parts of their freedom. Such social contracts gave the sovereign state a monopoly on the use of violence when needed for conflict management. The task of the state became balancing its own demands for order and security with the market's demand for freedom. How external threats were interpreted was decisive for this balancing act. Hobbes gave priority to the preservation of order or security and spoke in favor of an authoritarian state. Following the English civil war, the emergence of the *liberal state* transformed the balance between state and market and changed the basis for the social contract, as described by John Locke (1632–1704) in his *Glorious Revolution* (1688). Subsequently, *democracy* gradually developed into an important tool for managing social conflicts. Antiquity's concept of democracy (people's power) changed to meet the needs of a new time, when the ideas of delegation and representation became central. The social stratification of society allowed for the emergence of different political parties to look after the interests of the electorate, allowing those affected by decisions to participate indirectly in influencing their formulation.

Political Dynamics of the State, Market, and Civil Society

Referring to the industrialization of Europe, the Hungarian social anthropologist Karl Polanyi (1886–1964) described the field of tension between **[p. 1387 ↓]** the market's need for freedom and the people's need for security and social safety as having two stages. During the first movement, the market became disconnected from the political regulatory framework and subsequently also from reciprocal social relations. Eventually, local resistance emerged in the form of a second movement, which gave priority to

the interests of society and citizens. Political decision making was reintroduced, and democracy was strengthened. Polanyi described the development of society as a constant dialectic between market and politics.

The Italian political philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) analyzed the dynamics of this political interaction between the first and the second movements as *wars of position* between different historic blocks. In Gramsci's view, the field of tension between the state's striving for order and the market's demands for freedom was complemented by civil society's striving for justice. The power relations that characterized the war of position and determined its outcome also came to mark the *hegemonic discourse.* For Gramsci, the issue was achieving control over the state. Only thereafter could freedom be attained. He also viewed the exercise of power as a balancing act between consent and coercion. There was no state without elements of both.

Marxism in different varieties has contributed to understanding the causes and development of social conflicts during the later phases of European industrialization. Because it focuses on antagonisms between labor and capital, Marxism has had less to offer in explaining contemporary conflict patterns. Network capitalism's delocalization of production has meant that conflicts tend to be less about social control or material poverty resulting from exploitation, but rather about poverty resulting from being excluded from the system of production.

New Pattern of Conflict

For many countries in the southern hemisphere, the nation-state project is still in its infancy. Breaking the colonial structure to establish a social contract has been difficult. A weak domestic resource base reduced not only the capacity of the state to provide social security but also its capacity to mobilize resources.

The legitimacy of the state remained fragile, and its incapacity to achieve a monopoly on violence impaired the security of its citizens. A common feature of the kind of armed conflict emerging after the Cold War is that the civilian population is hit the hardest. Although these conflicts find different local expressions, they often have common global

ramifications through their loosely connected networks, which extend far across national borders.

The causes of the social conflicts that develop in such situations vary. Contemporary conflict researchers speak about *protracted* social conflicts with roots in a complex web of structural and psychocultural causes. *Relative deprivation* is an important driving force, with its basis in a sense of poverty that often reaches beyond the strictly economic and material aspects and extends to people's need to be recognized and included in society's development, with the same rights and opportunities as others. Relative deprivation is not a matter of comparison between what people have and what they would like to have. Rather, it is a matter of what people feel entitled to have, according to the social context where they are situated. Accordingly, people can develop a relatively great sense of injustice and exclusion, independent of their actual social status and class affiliation. Relative deprivation can appear not only in people with a low material living standard but also in people who are higher in the social hierarchy. At times, people feel that they are being treated unfairly because of their group identity. Frustrated elites trying to strengthen their social power can exploit this "politicization of identity" through an "instrumentalization of politics." Frustration within different population groups, leading to violence, becomes likelier as the country becomes closer to the "trap of low-level security equilibrium." This concept denotes a situation in which economic balance has been established at too low a level of development; poverty and a sense of injustice among ordinary people may breed political mobilization in frustrated elites. Through a gradual reorientation from macro-oriented financial support to a more micro-adjusted *social cohesion support*, the international development community could make a pivotal contribution to easing these frustrations. The Norwegian peace researcher Johan Galtung spoke about the importance of development efforts to create **[p. 1388 ↓]** *positive peace*, while John Burton coined the term *provention*, by which he meant that conflicts can be prevented by promoting local development. For both thinkers, the issue is rebuilding people's social trust and belief in the future.

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Globalization of Social Conflicts

For countries in the northern hemisphere, the foundation of liberal democracy is changing. Cross-border *network capitalism* has begun to replace national systems of production. The global has come closer. The party system is in a crisis, as people's social affiliation and identity become increasingly fluid. Most people do not want to be represented by someone speaking in their name. The faith in grand theory, in which development was solely about social engineering, has died. Along with demands for renewal and diversity, ideological conditions are changing. Politics is individualized and limited to that which penetrates everyday life. This becomes especially clear within emerging social movements. Thus, while political dynamics are having difficulties taking root at the national level in the South, these established dynamics in the North are tending to lose their national ties.

The intensified process of globalization has created new threats to peace and development. How people perceive increased international economic, political, social, and cultural interconnections is often dependent on where they are situated. Like most people in Europe and North America, many hundreds of millions of people in China and India have benefited from globalization, as their living conditions have improved substantially. But another large number of people, mainly in Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and eastern Europe, are experiencing increased poverty. Growing disparities between poor and rich give different access to the Earth's resources and to influence over political decisions.

This social conflict at the global level has become especially palpable in recent years, recalling the double movement that Polanyi used to describe European industrialization. The first movement today consists of a corporate-driven globalization striving for market expansion on a global scale. Its shortcomings have given rise to a second movement from below with different political grounds. As Polanyi already pointed out, it is far from given that the second movement is built on a move toward progressive politics. At one end of the spectrum of social forces in today's second movement is a more explicitly antiglobal orientation, consisting in part of attempts to restore the prerequisites for maintaining a nation and save what can be saved of the welfare state. The fortress builders and more xenophobic forces want to shut out globalization and

protect themselves from the multicultural influence that they believe threatens their local and national distinctive character. In other parts of the world, many social movements turn against the internationalism of the West. In the twenty-first century, political Islam has been able to find allies within antiglobal right-wing forces in the United States as well as in Europe.

At the other side of the spectrum, the *global justice movement* consists of reactions to the unequal conditions of globalization in the southern hemisphere. Many of these movements want to fight poverty by separating from the neoliberal world order; instead of deregulating trade, they would strengthen the internal base of accumulation and increase self-sufficiency, primarily as regards foodstuffs. Rising population reinforces the need for employment in the countryside, so that young men are not forced into the cities, where they soon become targets for recruitment to illegal networks inclined to violence. Any economic gains from a deregulated trade are believed to be outweighed by increased security costs resulting from growing social unrest and political instability.

These movements have also found allies within the developed northern hemisphere among those striving for a different style of globalization, one that is more sustainable and democratic. Many people react against the increasing level of commercialization: not only against privatization of the public sector, leading to the sale of services, but also against commercial interests increasingly being allowed to take over public space. The insight that "our world is not for sale" and the struggle to ameliorate the market economy's consumption culture are becoming a more and more important common denominator for emerging social **[p. 1389 ↓]** movements. So is awareness that increasingly large parts of the existing environmental space must be reserved for overcoming the increasing income gaps.

With the help of information technology, these diverse movements try not only to globalize the challenge to corporate-driven globalization but also to spread hope that another world and another kind of modernity are possible. The capacity of these groups to mobilize took the world by surprise, first in connection with the abolishment of the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (1997) and later in connection with the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle two years later (1999), when delegates were hindered from entering. A forerunner here is the *Zapatista* struggle for indigenous land rights in Chiapas, Mexico; there, in the mid-1990s, modern communication technology

and the Internet started what has been called a *netwar*, where "a war of the flea" quickly turned into a "war of the swarm."

The Need for New Political Arenas

While feelings of injustice and democratic deficits contribute to increased social tension and conflict around the world, there is a lack of global arenas and institutions that, earlier in history, used democracy as a tool to keep conflicts from becoming increasingly violent and destructive. Global problems demand global solutions. At the same time, the United Nations has become increasingly paralyzed since the nation-states of the Westphalian order, on which the modern system is built, have lost a great deal of their political power and moved toward obsolescence. In recent years, representatives of the corporate sector and civil society have tried to broaden their contacts to manage common problems at the global level themselves. Sustainable development, debt cancellation, human rights, and fair trade and other global issues were high on the agenda during the World Economic Forum in Davos, as well as the social movements' corresponding World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil. These new political arenas attract substantial media attention and help to identify the problems and formulate proposed solutions. At the same time, the mandates for leaders in these arenas are unclear: Whom do they represent? What is the base of their political legitimacy? Naturally, these arenas also lack legislative powers to translate words into deeds. Many critics hold that such forums become yearly fairs that raise a great deal of dust but leave the issues unresolved.

The great contemporary challenge is to create legitimate institutions that can manage existing conflicts and return to people their social trust. New forms for democracy and political influence must be developed at different levels to create conditions for the emergence of new social contracts. The questions of power and democracy have always been intimately linked. The original purpose of democracy was to combat the abuse of power. Its goal was the empowerment of people. Through increasing the possibilities for and capabilities of political participation, the exercise of power could become something liberating. During the era of nation-state building, economic and political power was relatively visible. In network society, it has often moved behind computer screens and become more invisible. Above all, the exercise of power

is changing its form. Today, the issue is increasingly one of power over thought —*discursive power*, that is, power over how people think and relate to different circumstances, something that is decisive for preserving the prevailing social order. It is no longer a matter of taking political power. For the new social movements, the issue increasingly seems to be empowerment vis-à-vis the market, strengthening people's consumer power and delimiting the commercial influence on everyday life. Through an ongoing resistance to all forms of abuse of power, political and economic power should be transformed into an integrated part of the desired social order.

Confrontational Dialogue for Conflict Management

Until now, state power structures have tried to manage these new types of social conflict through a two-track strategy: seeking dialogue and consensus with more moderate forces, while being repressive toward the more radical movements in the framework of law enforcement. The goal has been to separate the constructive human rights activists from the more destructive and **[p. 1390 ↓]** violent forces. Events during recent summits, with significant confrontations between the police and demonstrators, have shown the difficulty of distinguishing one type of demonstrator from another. It has become increasingly clear that this type of social conflict cannot be resolved through police action; rather, it is a political problem. The work of bringing about dialogue has intensified.

The problem is often that the power relationship between the parties is asymmetric. The powerful are not used to communicating with networks where no one has the mandate to represent someone else. In addition, evaluating the legitimacy of social movements can be difficult. The powerless, on the other hand, whose identity is often built on the sense of injustice and exclusion, see little reason for dialogue with those whose power they consider illegitimate. The parties thus continue talking at crosspurposes, and the conflicts are aggravated because of different perceptions of the world and different understandings of the politically possible. To improve communication, attempts have been made to use a more confrontational dialogue, which aims to deepen mutual understanding of the roots of both diverging and common interests. The different views

and perceptions that shape the pattern of actions and relations to others must be confronted and carefully examined.

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See also

- Colonialism
- Conflict
- Economic Development, Law and
- Globalization, Resistance to Economic
- Hobbes, Thomas
- Industrialization
- Legitimacy
- Locke, John
- Marxism
- Polanyi, Karl
- Power, Law and
- Social Contract
- Social Status
- State, Government, and Legal Order

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