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*Sociological Perspectives*, Vol. 36, No. 4. (Winter, 1993), pp. 289-313.

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*Sociological Perspectives* is currently published by University of California Press.

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## WHAT DOES CONFLICT THEORY PREDICT ABOUT AMERICA'S FUTURE? 1993 Presidential Address

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**ABSTRACT:** *Main points of conflict theory are summarized. Multiple dimensions of social resources each generate potential conflicts between haves and have-nots. Potential interests become effective to the degree that they are mobilized, relative to the mobilization of opposing interests; such mobilization depends upon both (1) conditions of ritual solidarity within a conflict group and (2) material resources for organizing. Each round of overt conflict sets the stage for the next round, both materially and by swaying the balance of perceived responsibility for past atrocities. Any particular conflict eventually deescalates, either because material resources for mobilization are used up or by the ritual disassembling of conflict groups. Mild conflicts continue longer than intense conflicts. Deescalation of mild conflicts typically occurs through bureaucratic institutionalization of concessions to interest groups; bureaucratic niches in turn become resource bases for future conflicts. These principles are applied to analyze the patterns of conflict in the United States in the late twentieth century and to predict future patterns of conflict.*

Sociological theory demonstrates its value when it is able to help us analyze social issues in the future. I attempt to show that conflict theory has matured, over the years, into a body of principles that has this sort of usefulness in practice. The results of the analysis may not be what we wish to hear; conflict theory often sounds a note of realism which clashes with the ideological themes of the time. In the late 20th century, when popular rhetoric talks of debureaucratization, conversion to markets, and getting rid of interest groups, sociological conflict theory brings us face to face with a more difficult reality.

In what follows, I summarize four main points of conflict theory, then go on to ask what these tell us to expect about America's future.

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**1. Each social resource produces a potential conflict, between those who have it and those who have not.**

There has been a convergence of opinion in recent decades that Max Weber's three dimensions capture the basic outlines of macro-sociological organization. The basic dimensions of resources and, hence, social conflicts are: (a) economic resources, which we may treat broadly as material conditions; (b) power resources, best conceived as positions within control networks; and (c) status or cultural resources, which I would translate as control over social rituals producing group solidarity and group symbolism. I have attempted to state each of these kinds of resources in such ways that we may observe their actual occurrence in everyday life.

Marx and Engels, among the earliest progenitors of conflict theory, believed that the economic dimension was the most important. Sociologists have found that economic conflicts are no more prominent than the other two types; indeed, economic conflicts are probably harder to mobilize into collective action than power or status conflicts. No doubt, Marx and Engels were aware of multiple dimensions of conflict in social life. They seized upon economic conflicts because they had a theory of how the economic dynamics and conflicts resulting from them drive the pattern of historical change. In contrast, there has been no well-formulated theory of how power or status conflicts produce long-term historical dynamics. We will come back to this point later, in trying to assess the American future. For even though much is obviously wrong with the Marxian theory of conflict, it does focus upon one point at which long-term problems and crises arise, even if it does not predict very well what will happen in response to these crises. We will see whether contemporary conflict theory can improve our understanding of these long-term patterns of conflict and change.

**2. Potential conflicting interests become effective to the extent that they are mobilized, relative to the mobilization of opposing interests.**

There are several ingredients which mobilize interests. We may group them roughly into two areas.

- a. *Emotional, moral, and symbolic mobilization.* The basic ingredients here are social contacts which create a shared identity among persons who have interests in common on one of the dimensions of potential conflict. Marx and Engels ([1848] 1959) recognized quite early a version of this principle. They predicted that capitalism would produce its own gravediggers, among other reasons because they expected the growth of monopolistic enterprises would concentrate workers together into huge factories, where they could easily acquire a strong sense of their own identity in the form of class consciousness. In contrast, Marx ([1852] 1963) felt the peasants would be bulwarks of reactionary regimes, because the conditions of rural life split them up like so many potatoes lumped in a sack, depriving them of consciousness of their own identity of interests

In terms of today's micro-sociology, the key ingredients which produce a group identity are the conditions that bring persons together to perform collective rituals. These include both the interaction rituals of everyday life, which mold some persons together as friends and status equals while excluding others from personal intimacy, as well as larger official and public rituals, which bring together a church, an organization, or a social movement. According to the familiar Durkheimian model, rituals produce not only a sense of social membership, with boundaries between those who belong and those who do not, but also moral feelings, dividing those who believe they are right from those whom they believe are wrong. Individuals are energized by group rituals, filled with what I refer to as "emotional energy." Also, rituals produce symbols, the cultural codes by which people think and through which they construct their perceptions of the world around themselves. Members of an interest group which is highly mobilized by social rituals thus acquire not only a sense of their own identity but also a polarized sense of membership and a symbolic worldview which similarly dichotomizes the world; as individuals, they are charged up with emotional energy to carry on battles on behalf of their group (Collins 1988: ch. 6).

Conflict theory is sometimes criticized as a one-sided sociology. But it is hardly true that conflict theory, in the full-fledged version which has been accumulating over the years of sociological research, ignores positive ties of social solidarity. An isolated individual cannot dominate an organized group, and it is position in the networks of material, power, and status resources which shape the major interests and social conflicts in the first place. The theory of how group solidarity is produced through interaction rituals is a key to the theory of conflict mobilization. There is no need to combine conflict theory eclectically with functionalism or some other mode of analysis which ignores the fundamental importance of conflict. What is important to stress is that the solidarity that we find in social life exists primarily at the level of relatively small, concrete groups. There is a good deal of evidence for micro-solidarity in everyday life; sometimes, under conditions of massive conflict group mobilization, this solidarity is temporarily expanded to large social movements. The macro structure of society, on the other hand, is well explained by the lineup of material and power resources, and the ideological domination which results from them. I do not mean these sentences to be mere polemical phrases. There is an explanatory payoff: I am arguing that what we know about the predictable processes of solidarity apply on the micro and occasionally the meso level; what we know that gives us predictable patterns on the macro level, on the other hand, comes from principles of conflict.

- b. *Material resources for organizing.* The second aspect of conflict mobilization involves resources which enable a group to carry on its fight (Dahrendorf

1959; Tilly 1978). These include resources for communication and transportation, as well as weapons (in the case of military conflicts), supplies to sustain persons while they are engaged in action, and the money to be converted into all these. Among such material resources we should also count the sheer number of persons who are mobilized and, in some cases, their physical strength.

Several corollaries follow. If there are two main forms of resources which mobilize a conflict group, there are two main ways in which a group can win or lose a conflict. Victory or defeat depends upon the level of resources which a group mobilizes relative to those mobilized by their opponents. In the first instance, a group can win by generating a higher level of ritual solidarity as compared to their enemies. Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement, with its marches and songs, its moral commitment, and its appeal to vast resources of potential sympathizers and emotional energies, exemplify a superior ritual mobilization which was unmatched by the ritual mobilization mounted by their segregationist enemies. The same applies when we consider in isolation the other ingredient, material resources for conflict. The political campaign with the larger purse can spend its way to victory over a poorly financed campaign, and both the number of troops and the outcome of wars are generally determined by the depth of logistical backup and, ultimately, of industrial production. Of course, many other outcomes are possible along this continuum besides the clear-cut victory of one side over the other; both sides may mobilize approximately equal levels of ritual and material resources, resulting in a stalemate, or the levels of ritual and material resources may fluctuate, resulting in up-and-down swings of advantage from one opposing side to the other.<sup>1</sup>

There is a dynamic aspect to the resources which mobilize conflicts. Resources can be used up in the process of conflict. This is especially obvious in regard to material-resource mobilization; armies are depleted by casualties, and states break down in revolution when their treasuries are bankrupt; on a smaller scale, social movements become demobilized as they lose their ability to keep their members in action. There is also a temporal dynamic of ritual mobilization; emotional energies both peak and fade away, as the optimal moment for ritual mobilization is passed. We shall see shortly that these dynamics implied in the exhaustion of resources explain long-run declines in conflicts.

### 3. *Conflict engenders subsequent conflict.*

Conflict turns the wheels of history, because the endpoint of one conflict is a new lineup of resources, which in turn become the basis for the formation of new interests and new conflicts. The most familiar process here is that the mobilization of interests on one side of a conflict tends to give rise to countermobilization of the

opposing side. This is, of course, contingent upon the existence of resources which the other side can use to mobilize themselves. The classic conflict theory of Simmel ([1908] 1955) and Coser (1956) expresses the general point: the process of conflict itself tends to create group solidarity and to pull uninvolved persons into the conflict. Thus, the side which is not yet mobilized is galvanized into action by what to them is the impingement of an outside enemy. The linking of mobilization and countermobilization is an emotional process, as Scheff and Retzinger (1991) emphasize in their work on how arousals of shame and rage recycle through opposing loops and produce what they call "interminable conflicts." In terms of Interaction Ritual theory, it can be said that a conflict increases the prevalence of a common emotional mood (in this case, fear or anger), which in turn enhances the focus of attention upon a single subject (the enemy). These further strengthen feelings of group membership, pressures to conform to the group, and the exaltation of the group's symbols along with increasing antipathy to symbols representing those outside the boundaries of the group.

From this comes the typical ideological pattern found in highly mobilized conflicts. A group's culture during a conflict is emotionally charged, not detached or neutral. People lose the capacity to overview the larger context. Perceptions become increasingly selective. With ideological polarization, each side sees little but the worst of its enemies. For this reason, highly mobilized conflicts tend to turn into a ritualized exchange of atrocities. There are plenty of horrible examples of this process. The string of atrocities of Croats against Serbs, and vice versa, and now against Bosnians as well, involves not only real actions but also perceptions of the enemy which are narrowed to emotionally charged images of the opposing group as nothing but a record of previous atrocities. Atrocities committed in return become ritual punishments: expiations of bombings and tortures, mutilations and rapes are ritual recompense for previous atrocities committed by the other side. Whether the specific victims were actually guilty of atrocities in previous rounds becomes impossible for the avengers to perceive, for members of aroused conflict groups can see the world only through group categories and symbols of the most lurid tinge. Past atrocities, imaginery or real, produce real repetitions; the innocent in one round become part of the guilty in the next.

We see here another connection between conflict and morality. For solidarity has not only a positive face but also a negative one; the group which is most morally committed, its members most dedicated to the altruistic, self-sacrificing tasks of defending the collective whole, is also the group which is most morally self-righteous. In true Durkheimian fashion, the morally mobilized group feels itself an agency of justice; its punishments are meted out as expiations for crimes. In this moral polarization, a group becomes blind to the likelihood that its own punishments upon the enemy will be perceived by the other side as atrocities in their own right.

The dynamics of winning or losing through the mobilization of conflict resources thus tend to hinge upon the relative balance of atrocities. This is espe-

cially the case when sides are relatively evenly matched in their own resources and the outcome depends on which side can pull in more neutral bystanders as allies. Simmel noted that one way in which conflict produces social solidarity is by extending networks of allies. But how much does this happen, and at what rate? And which side is more successful in gaining allies? What we see here is an expanded version of the creation of ritual solidarity by focusing attention upon a common object and sharing a single mood. The broadcasting of reports about atrocities is a dramatic way of rivetting the attention of a larger audience; when it happens, the common mood which forges a group of moral sympathizers is the moral disgust and anger against whichever side is perceived as perpetrator of the atrocity.

Although there may be a long string of atrocities, perhaps alternating among sides, earlier history is eclipsed when there is especially widespread publicity about the most current atrocity. Thus, conflict has an episodic quality, with sudden swings and reversals of fortune, depending upon who is caught in the glare of publicity about the latest atrocity. Given the emotional and ideological polarization that happens to groups already mobilized in a conflict, it is likely that one side, in their militancy against what they feel are the previous atrocities of their opponents, can easily be caught up in carrying out acts of violence or punishment which to an outside viewer will appear as atrocities in their own right. Examples of such atrocity-exchange dynamics are all too common; I will mention only a few. The memory of Nazi atrocities against Jews contributes strongly to the cognitive and emotional set of Israelis in perceiving the threat of militant Palestinians; out of this comes a string of actions by Israeli troops against Palestians of the *intifada* which are easily perceived both by the Arab world, and by many neutral observers, as atrocities of brutality and murder upon unarmed teenagers. Righteous anger among the Arabs leads to terrorist murders against Israelis in the next round, leading to further atrocities against Palestinians, and so on. Surrounding this exchange of real atrocities is a battle of publicity, with the balance of sympathies and alliances driven by the negative waves: emotional support flows away from whoever is perceived as having committed the latest, attention-focussing atrocity.

The backlash of atrocities also operates in conflicts at lower levels of violence. It would be possible to analyze here many conflicts currently going on in the United States: atrocities of right-to-life demonstrators in attacking abortion clinics, balanced by atrocities perceived by the other side in the rough handling by police which is often the fate of demonstrators; civil liberties atrocities in the battles over "political correctness" versus freedom of speech within schools. In all such instances, the balance of power tends to swing against the movement which is perceived by the hitherto uncommitted public as having gone too far. This dialectic of conflict swings is perceptible in the famous scandal of the Tailhook association, the carousing convention of Naval carrier pilots who forced women officers to walk through a gantlet of sexual assault. Newspaper accounts about the sequence of events leading up to this outbreak of mass sexual harassment indicate that an escalation of perceived atrocities was at work here, too. A long-standing conflict over



the role of women in combat had just been aired at the Tailhook convention; a panel of women officers had just made a strong claim for their legal rights to fly combat planes. The gantlet was a countermove directly in response to this challenge. Its barbaric ceremonial quality should not surprise us too much, for it had the qualities of a tribal ritual of the men's warrior association, with the sexual aggression against women forming a membership boundary around the male group. The gantlet was a punishment ritual against intruders from the point of view of the male pilots; like all socially powerful rituals, it caught up participants in an emotional intensity, which no doubt loosened the restraints on individual officers who might ordinarily have been more prudent. **One side's punishment ritual becomes the other side's atrocity. Out of publicity over such incidents comes major swings in the balance of public sympathy and, accordingly, shifts in power to win such a conflict.**

#### 4. *Conflicts diminish as resources for mobilization are used up.*

**Decreases in conflict come about by and large by the opposite of the processes which mobilize conflicts.** As there are two main ingredients in mobilization, there are two general types of deescalation or demobilization.

- a. **Deescalation occurs when the material costs of conflict are too high to continue. Although the emotional dynamics of escalation are dominant in the short run, over a period of time, material costs can override even a fervent war mobilization.** In general, within two years, the casualties and material expense of a large-scale war reduce war enthusiasm (De Mesquita, Siverson, and Woller 1992; Norpoth 1987; Ostrum and Simon 1985). Protracted military stalemates, no matter how bitterly motivated by the escalation of ideological hatreds, eventually lead to practical pressures to disengage. Material resources are used up on both sides of a conflict, although mutual stalemate is only one of the possibilities; if one side exhausts its resources much more rapidly, the conflict usually ends by the victory of the side which has outlasted the other. **Whether deescalation comes about by victory or by stalemate depends on the relative balance of resource exhaustion between the opposing sides.**

One corollary is that **milder conflicts go on much longer than intense conflicts.** A mild conflict uses up less material resources, and thus keeps available the **conditions for sustaining conflict.** For this reason, terrorism and guerilla wars, which are only episodically destructive and entail low degrees of military mobilization, are usually chronic and festering. The long struggles over Northern Ireland are of this kind; the *intifada* in Israel seems likely to have the same profile. Conflict among social movements, operating on a predominantly peaceful level, such as the anti/pro-abortion conflicts in the United States since the 1980s, are also sustained by being relatively low consumers of conflict resources relative to the material resources available to participants. Here, occasional acts of violence operate as emotional



incentives, periodically recreating intensity but not destroying enough material resources to change the overall level of mobilization.

Another corollary is that *deescalation of relatively mild forms of group conflict tends to take place by bureaucratization*. Concessions are made; partial victories are institutionalized; the machinery of mediation is put in place on a permanent basis. *Such organizational forms are bureaucratic insofar as they involve formal rules, permanent organizational positions, and specialized personnel*. Thus, the labor battles early in the twentieth century were institutionalized in labor laws, election procedures, and permanent organization within government agencies, managerial hierarchies, and unions. Conflicts over dangerous working conditions or product liability led to the expansion of regulations imposed by insurance requirements and past law suits. Similar processes have occurred in recent decades. The civil rights movement has become institutionalized in codified hiring and grievance procedures, statistical checks on racial job distributions, and specialized departments for administering and monitoring affirmative action standards. The same kinds of organizational complexities have been developed in response to the feminist mobilization; ongoing conflicts over sexual harassment will doubtless expand the sector of organizational regulation still further. Still other movements, for environmental protection or for gay rights, can be expected to increase the degree of organizational regulation.

There is, in short, a politics of bureaucratization, operating apart from size and technology. *Bureaucracy is, to a considerable extent, a precipitate of past social conflicts*. This is one of the unwelcome lessons of *the sociology of conflict*. The result of conflict is never the utopia envisioned in the moments of intense ideological mobilization; there are hard-won gains, usually embedded in an expanded bureaucratic shell. Those who would like to debureaucratize today's society are ahistorical romanticists; what they are asking is to clear away the results of victories by past conflict movements.

- b. The second large form of deescalation is the obverse of the mobilization of ritual solidarity. *Deescalation occurs as conflict groups lose the conditions for identity rituals*. This may happen because the group becomes disassembled; when its members become dispersed, they are unable to participate in a collective ritual. Some kinds of conflicts are inherently short-run for this reason; battles of school-vacation carousers or of pop-concert fans against police or security guards are necessarily short-lived. Another way in which a conflict group becomes disassembled involves more long-run ecological processes. The group boundaries may be lost, by fraternization with the enemy or with third parties who dilute the identity of conflict mobilization. *A familiar version of this occurs when one conflict is overridden by a different, cross-cutting line of conflict*. The ethnic conflicts of the early twentieth century, between Anglo-American and non-Anglo European migrants,

have subsequently been largely overridden by conflict and hence group identification on black/white lines (Halle 1984). In the same way, the mobilization of still further dimensions of conflict, such as the gay rights movement of the 1990s, makes less salient other lines of conflict, including racial divisions.

Under such conditions, the rituals of the groups most directly involved in a conflict upstage the rituals of other groups. An interaction ritual can reach a high degree of emotional intensity only if there is a single focus of attention. Thus, although there are numerous lines of potential conflict around the various distributions of economic power and status resources, only one conflict can have a high degree of emotional and symbolic intensity at a time. Insofar as there are a plethora of non-coinciding lines of groups conflict—and this, of course, is an empirical question—a long series of disparate conflicts tends to demobilize each in turn.

### APPLYING CONFLICT PRINCIPLES TO THE AMERICAN FUTURE

The United States at the turn of the twenty-first century is in the midst of what might be called the postrevolutionary syndrome. The height of mobilization of the civil rights movement is several decades in the past. The feminist movement is past its peak of militant mobilization. The backlash movements which counter-mobilized against these are also past their highest levels of intensity. Perhaps the only movement which is still on an upward mobilizing path, or near its apex, is the gay/lesbian-rights movement. From the point of view of those most committed to the worldviews of these movements, of course, enemies are still strong and there is no declaration of victory. From the point of view of realistic conflict theory, this is not surprising. The ideal goals of social movements are never closely approached in practice. At the same time, there has been a transfer of resources: predictably, it has been the most mobilized members of these movements (generally those from the higher social classes among their participants) who have won the new positions or established new channels of access. Concessions have been won; symbolic and ideological barriers have been breached. There are more women in the professions, in management, in higher education, and in political office; there also has been some expansion of elite positions of blacks and other minorities. Struggles go on to expand these beachheads, but now they are carried out less by mass mobilization involving the emotional intensities of dramatic conflict and more by the organizational weapons conceded by the privileged in the earlier round of conflict. At the same time, underclasses of minorities and women remain in poverty, and the majority of women in clerical and service jobs reap few benefits from the women's movement. Realistically, one would not expect there to be massive political mobilization based on these underclasses; to a considerable extent, the siphon-

ing off of the higher social classes into the bureaucratic struggles over organizational advantage means that there are fewer ritual and material resources available for mobilization on a mass front.

Passing the peak of conflict mobilization does not mean issues for conflict disappear. What we see is the shift from the acute to the chronic version of the conflict. The outcome of each round of conflict sets up the conditions for the next round. The concessions won by the civil rights and women's movements take the form of bureaucratic regulations formalizing claims upon positions in most large-scale organizations. In terms of material resources which can sustain a conflict group, the movements of minorities and women are better off than they were decades ago, when they relied primarily upon the emotional energies of dramatic ritual confrontations. By the same token, minorities and women who are in contention for elite positions are tied much more closely to the organizational Establishment; their mobilizing interests as well as the resources for obtaining their goals are localized to particular organizational contexts. Thus, although we can expect in upcoming decades that there will be many more instances of conflict over affirmative action policies and statistical patterns of discrimination, these conflicts are likely to settle into a routinized pattern similar to that of the labor movement around the mid-twentieth century.

Will the symbolic and emotional lines of race and gender conflict also decline in the medium-run future? Inevitably, some degree of emotional disintensification has already happened. The peaks of intensity are always those at the time of a massive public confrontation with enemies. The spirit of the civil rights demonstrators during the violence of the 1960s could not be sustained in the absence of this kind of ritual mobilization, and the conditions for a mass mobilization of a civil rights united front have long since passed. Moreover, the very success of the protest movements has brought some dissolving of group lines. Women who win jobs as business executives not surprisingly acquire some of the culture of business conservatives; the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill hearings brought into visibility a sector of black conservatives whose concerns are to behave as accepted members of a successful mainstream. From the point of view of militants of the protest movements, such a shift in loyalties looks like ideological treason, but sociologically, there is nothing surprising about individuals acquiring the culture of the group with which they associate.

The fact that ritual demobilization sets in along some boundaries which used to be clearly marked conflict groups, does not mean that emotionally intense conflicts cannot flare up on another front. The Los Angeles riot of 1992 following the first Rodney King beating verdict is an instance of how group antagonisms can escalate. Nevertheless, no wide-ranging and large-scale mobilization of a black movement followed from the Los Angeles riot; an uprising of the urban underclass in a particular city, under current conditions of the fragmentation of movement-resource mobilization, is likely to remain a local phenomenon, without much spillover. Outbursts of violence contribute to a rather frenetic mood on the part of the general

public, but the ritual focus of attention remains scattered and symbolically clouded. The Los Angeles riot took its place as just another in a series of horrific events, along with terrorist bombings, religious-cult confrontations, foreign military atrocities, and many other disconnected dramas. Each captures a momentary focus of attention but its symbolic battle lines are wiped away as it is upstaged by the next emotion-riveting drama.

Perhaps the issue which can mobilize the largest number of persons into a systematic conflict today is sexual harassment. Gender conflict involves potentially the largest groups in our society, and numerous issues of gender power, wealth, and status remain. In the past, the intimate association of males and females, in the family and in sexual contexts, dampened the mobilization of these latent conflicts into overt conflicts. The lengthening period that men and women are living in unmarried arrangements—by the rising age of marriage, the high level of divorce, and other demographic features—is one of the conditions that has allowed militant gender conflicts to emerge in the twentieth century that were unprecedented in most historical periods since some tribal societies. Nevertheless, despite strains on the modern family and upheavals in sexual relations, men and women still continue to have a great deal of intimate contact. From the point of view of the most militant mobilization of gender conflict, this is fraternization with the enemy, resulting in demobilization of ritual solidarity within the conflict group.

For that reason, conflicts over sexual harassment have the potential for greatly escalating the militancy of gender mobilization. Consider the hypothetical extremes: at one end, if every male-female encounter were a situation of extreme distrust, hedged around with defensive safeguards on one side and either withdrawal or hostile counterattack on the other, then fraternization with the enemy would be zero and the ritual solidarity of gender-conflict groups would be at a height. Sexual harassment issues potentially can surface everywhere: in schools, work, shopping, public places; mobilization on this issue potentially can affect virtually every aspect of social organization. At the other extreme, the complete sexualization of all male/female encounters would keep gender conflicts submerged from ritual and ideological consciousness. Realistically, what we are seeing in the 1990s—and probably can expect for the near future—is some movement in the intermediate part of the continuum.

Sexual harassment deals with emotionally charged materials; thus, it is ready-made for a high degree of ritual intensity, whenever group attention is focused upon it. Like most intensely mobilized conflicts, it is subject to the dynamics of alternating and competing atrocities. Thus, it is predictable that as women's mobilization draws attention to more sexual victimization of women, the bureaucratic regulations put in place will give rise to counteratrocities, such as incidents of men protesting against unjust accusations. The result will be likely to stabilize the lines of gender conflict somewhere short of the extremes of the continuum. Atrocity and counteratrocity defocus attention. The level of moral advantage sways from one side to the other, neutralizing the spreading waves of emotional mobilization

which characterized the first emergence of the issue. Sexual harassment conflicts too are likely to become routinized.

### **The Overall Pattern: Increasing Conflict Mobilization, Increasingly Fragmented**

The overarching pattern for the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first is that resources for mobilizing conflicts have become more widespread. The levels of education, communications, media participation, and knowledge of organizing skills are probably at their historic heights. At the same time, the coercive power of the central government to keep the lid on potential conflicts is relatively weak. Government agencies themselves are ridden with conflicts, and their chronic budgetary problems mean that government officials themselves are dissatisfied and disunited. The partial victories of earlier rounds of movement mobilization have resulted in institutionalized resources for conflict groups: affirmative action programs, specialized staff overseeing the interests of particular groups, regulatory agencies whose *raison d'être* is to focus attention upon various social problems. All these conditions add up to a situation in which there are a great many interest groups with sufficient resources to mobilize at least intermittently into public conflict. In addition, we can invoke the corollary cited above: the institutionalization of conflicts by various mediating agencies has reduced the intensity and destructiveness of conflicts; this means that since conflicts are milder, they can go on longer.

If there is more overt conflict in our society than perhaps ever before, at the same time, this conflict is extremely fragmented. Our condition is the opposite of that imagined by Marx, who expected there would be an increasingly unification of the oppressed groups, under the banner of the labor movement. One reason Marx predicted a thoroughly revolutionary transformation of society was that his theory anticipated this simplification of conflicts, resulting in a final showdown of haves against have-nots. Instead, what we have gotten is an increasing multiplication of mobilized conflict groups. Some of the most striking conflicts of the late twentieth century—gender, sexual preference—were undreamed of in previous centuries, when the focus was upon class, religion, and political dynasty. Nationalism and ethnicity became prominent conflicts in the nineteenth century, upsetting earlier lines of conflict. In the late twentieth century, ethnic conflicts remain as prominent as ever. Since ethnic identities are particularistic, they can hardly go very far in producing wide-ranging united fronts. Ethnic conflicts sometimes take on the tone of haves versus have-nots on the economic dimension, but they rarely hold together grand coalitions of the oppressed. The 1992 Los Angeles riots were ostensibly as much an expression of hostility among minority groups (black, Asian, Chicano) as they were an uprising against the entire structure of privilege, and this pattern may be indicative of the most violent outbreaks of recent decades.

The widespread mobilization of conflicts today is very far from being a movement of allied interests. The black community is even less sympathetic to the gay

rights movement than the white community; the environmentalist movement is called white and elitist. A good deal of the most militant mobilization cannot be fitted by any ideological stretch into the left. The Right-to-Life movement, with its moral fervor and its mass demonstrations against abortion clinics, in many ways is closest to the tactics and emotional dynamism of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. The religious right shows much of the alienation and withdrawal from society that once characterized the hippies. There are even movements, such as the anti-smoking campaign, which combine crusading moralists from both the traditionalist right and the health-conscious liberals.

The common denominator of all these conflict groups is not a stake for or against the existing system of stratification. It is simply that all these groups draw upon the increasingly widespread availability of resources for organizational mobilization that characterizes the late twentieth century. The information age, which is also the age of mass higher education and of a labor force concentrated in the tertiary sector, is the age of world history which has most widely available the resources to mobilize underlying conflicts. Latent conflict groups have always existed in far greater abundance than the few conflicts which came to the surface. Now, everyone is better organized. Even gangs of underclass toughs, formerly a local phenomenon, have acquired the resources to become large-scale, distance-spanning organizations. And if it is resource mobilization that is driving the proliferation of overt conflicts, we can expect no reversal on this trend in the future. Resources for organizing conflicts will probably become even more abundant in the future; a further fragmentation of conflicts will doubtless follow.

In the classic Simmel/Coser theory, the simultaneous mobilization of numerous fragmentary conflicts is a formula for social integration. Sociologists of the Left severely critiqued this theory as "pluralist," as an ideological cover for class and race domination. The critique was less than clear-sighted. It conflated several issues: whether the Simmelian model (that cross-cutting conflicts lead to social stability) is true as a theory; whether Simmelian cross-cutting conflicts empirically exist in the United States of the twentieth century; and whether social stability is a good thing. With more detachment, we can say that the theoretical principle is true, but that this does not mean empirically it is always the case that conflicts are cross-cutting. Nevertheless, we would have to say that, especially in the late twentieth century, the most prevalent pattern is the fragmentizing of conflicts, not their superimposition. Finally, on the evaluative question: Simmel, Coser, and the Parsonian functionalists who adopted their theory generally did have a tone of complacent endorsement of the social order of capitalist society. We can reverse the value judgment if we wish. From the point of view of conflict theory, the main thing that is holding our society together is a morass of fragmentary conflicts, each one taking attention away from the last. It is social integration through conflict, but it is not necessarily a good thing. Nor is it experienced as a good thing by most people. It prevents ideological polarization and cools the extreme emotions fanned by height-



ened moments of conflict; it also blocks concerted movements for social change. It is social integration by gridlock.

### **Economic Crisis Without Class Mobilization**

One form of conflict that has been strongly demobilized in the late twentieth century is class conflict. The unionized labor force has declined in numbers, political influence, and militancy. Whereas Marx and Engels expected workers to become concentrated in huge factories, the peak of aggregation was passed many decades ago. Today, the workforce is increasingly dispersed, as manufacturing becomes more machine intensive, more administratively top-heavy, more spread out among global locations. The shift of work into service and bureaucratic settings has brought a blurring of symbolic boundaries and a loss of class identification; though pay and authority disparities are still great, there is more fraternization with the enemy, less working-class ritual solidarity. In the downward direction, there is a gulf between the regularly employed working class and the underclass—the lumpenproletariat from which Marx expected nothing but opportunism and unconstructive violence. Among economic interest groups, the most ideologically fervent and mobilized is perhaps the middle-class tax protestors, a constituency that provided much of the anti-Establishment appeal of Ross Perot's 1992 campaign. Nowhere is there a well-organized opposition to the domination of economic-property holders.

Why is this significant? As I remarked near the beginning of this presentation, Marx and Engels' theory of class conflict remains an important model because they alone have a theory of long-term patterns of change in their favorite analytical domain. We have nothing comparable for predicting trends in power or status conflicts; in fact, both of these seem to oscillate in an ideologically meaningless fashion. That is why my summary of the implication of conflict theory, focusing on the gridlock of multidimensional conflicts, no doubt conveys a rather nihilistic tone. Marxian theory of economic change, on the other hand, makes a straightforward prediction: capitalism goes through periodic economic crises. Growth declines, production falls, workers are unemployed, inequality increases. At the top, capitalists scramble in financial manipulations; a segment becomes richer plundering their unfortunate peers.

Marx's theory is doubtless mistaken about its very long-run projections of the final collapse of capitalism and its transformation into an egalitarian socialism. But short of this apocalyptic aspect, Marxian economic processes give a rather accurate picture of the crises tendencies within the capitalist business cycle. The economic crisis of the 1990s, the malaise which got Clinton elected president, fits the pattern of a Marxian crisis. More important than the business downturn, which is partially offset by speculative movements in the financial sector, is the structural transformation of employment. The middle class and management are affected by layoffs usually confined to the working class. Corporate downsizing and computerization indicate that shrinking employment opportunities are not merely temporary abut



permanent. Coinciding with these trends in the private sector are pervasive budgetary crisis at virtually every level of government, resulting in large cuts in government employment.

In the classic Marxian theory, the key factor is technology displacing labor. We do not need to burden ourselves with the labor theory of value, and the prediction of a falling rate of profit; these have been criticized on logical and empirical grounds, but they are not crucial for the theoretical dynamics of economic crisis. The accurate parts of the theory are that capitalist competition presses for repeated technological innovation, simultaneously increasing productive capacity while reducing demand for labor. The classic Marxian crisis consists of rising unemployment together with excess productive capacity; the labor force is unable to keep up consumer demand, while cost-cutting in production drives businesses into bankruptcy, to be absorbed by wealthier competitors. These processes are historically accurate. There has been no final, ultimately destructive crisis of capitalism, not because the core Marxian dynamic is wrong but because of a number of additional conditions. The financial sector has become much more dominant than foreseen by Marx; a great deal of business profit—in recent decades, most of it—has come from financial manipulation rather than from production. The financial sector has become semiautonomous from the dynamics of unemployment and business crisis, and it exerts some counter-cyclical forces. But it is doubtful that finance-heavy capitalism can in the long run offset the trends toward structural unemployment, business failure, and increasing class inequality which result from the central dynamic of the technological displacement of labor.

I am well aware that conventional wisdom among economists regards technological unemployment as a transitory phenomenon, which is always overtaken by further waves of expansion of new areas of employment. The mechanization of agriculture once released farm labor for industries; next, the mechanization of industrial production reduced the blue-collar labor force but has been followed by new areas of employment. Is this process in principle endless? The slack of technological unemployment has historically been taken up by three conditions: (1) new consumer products, which have created a demand for new kinds of labor; (2) expansion of government employment; and (3) a shift from blue-collar to white-collar employment, and from primary and secondary production to the tertiary sector of administration and services.

It is reasonable to expect that future expansion of these sorts will again take up the slack of current technological unemployment? It is certainly true that we are in another wave of invention of consumer products (condition 1), mostly in home electronics and computation. Can we expect that the demand for labor for producing and repairing such new products will take up the slack? I suggest that it will not, among other reasons because the production of just these goods has become increasingly mechanized, while repair services are being displaced by throw-away commodities.

The other two areas which historically have taken up unemployment slack, government employment (condition 2) and white-collar expansion (condition 3), are the places which have come especially under attack by the cost-cutting movements of the 1980s and 1990s. Virtually all of the expansion of employment in the United States since the 1950s has come about by expansion or government; this is the sector which is now under pressure to shrink, by budgetary crises at state and local levels and by the popular political movement of budget reduction at the federal level. For the immediate future, barring a massive reversal in political motivations, government employment will do nothing to offset technological unemployment and, indeed, may add to it. At the same time, private business has launched a movement to cut back white-collar employment. Even managerial ranks, which in the past have been havens in times of business downturns, are now being decimated.

If this trend continues, it will be a historical reversal. Technological displacement has hitherto cut into manual labor almost exclusively. Now, technological advances in the form of computerization have hit the white-collar sector. Although the early phases of the introduction of office mechanization and computerization tended to increase the employment of skilled specialists, the more advanced levels of sophistication in computerized office management have created a new ideal of business-cost rationalization. The mechanization of the white-collar labor force has never seriously been attempted before; this has been one reason why the illusion has existed that propertyless employees working in offices are a class distinct from propertyless manual workers. The so-called "middle-class" should more accurately in property terms be referred to as the "white-collar working class"; its distinctiveness in life-style and consciousness have marked it off as a status group, but its economic uniqueness has not been the ownership of property, but its greater job security as compared to manual workers. The computerization of the office is likely to break down that distinction again; particularly so as the diminished working class which remains in the corporate business sector is converging toward office workers in their conditions of work.

The prospect is emerging that managers, who historically have appeared as a "new class" based on the separating of ownership from control, will increasingly find themselves subject to the insecurity of employment and vulnerability to technological displacement that once characterized the manual working class. The advance of high tech may finally bring about a good approximation to Marx's vision: a society divided between the owners of productive technology, and those who are subject to the market demands for their labor power. All of these trends are sure to be intensified in a few decades when and if more effective artificial intelligence (AI) and robotization set in. AI has the prospect of mechanizing and displacing not only routine white-collar administration but even professionals and managers. It may turn out that the limit upon job displacement by artificial workers is simply one of cost: humans will be confined to those jobs which are cheaper for them to perform than the cost of robots. Such a society will be very far from the a-sociological utopias depicted in science fiction; the most important social reality

will be economic class, and the key division will be between those who own robots and those whose labor power competes with the cost of robots.

In the conventional picture of economic development, technological displacement of this sort cannot occur, because there will always be a trend towards the creation of new job sectors demanding human skills. But will the size of such new job sectors be large enough to offset the overall labor displacement? We cannot all become computer programmers, and advances in AI are likely rather early on to automate programming. Nor will the expansion of services and small businesses take up sufficient slack, or reverse the trend towards inequality of income; we cannot all run gift shops or become consultants. The expansion of financial services, notable in the last decade, has an intrinsic limit; there cannot be a society in which virtually everyone is a banker or a realtor exchanging with each other loans and sales.

Let us put together the two wings of the prognosis. American society is settling into a Marxian-style structural crisis, but without a Marxian class mobilization. To the contrary, the fragmentation of conflict group makes a unified class-based movement reacting to the economic crisis both ideologically and organizationally remote. Furthermore, although we have a Marxian structural crisis, there is no prospect for a Marxian solution; hardly anyone believes there is such a thing as a socialist utopia, even if we had the political means of overthrowing capitalism.

Realistically, what can happen? Capitalism is not going to disappear. Whatever adjustments occur will take place within the framework of private property and of property-based class stratification. Nor are we likely to get a movement which has a clear ideological sense of where the structural problem is located. Nevertheless, there are pressures for adjusting, under whatever ideological cover and whatever degree of false consciousness, to keep the economy going. Capitalism cannot afford too high a level of unemployment, not for altruistic reasons but because it cuts consumer demand. In a market system whose dynamism is based largely on expanding markets for consumer products, it is economically rational to support whatever tenancies exist to create sufficient employment to make periodic upturns in the business cycle. That is not to say that capitalism cannot survive without continuous full employment; on the contrary, employment will likely oscillate around some level below which businesses suffer, but above which labor-cost cutting is attractive. There is also a free-rider problem for the individual capitalist: it is in the individual enterprise's interest to have someone else do the Keynesian stimulation of employment and consumer demand while each enterprise pursues its own policy of reducing labor costs as much as possible. This implies that if Keynesian policies are pursued, it will have to come from elsewhere than the profit-oriented private sector.

This seems a conundrum. The structural crisis of white-collar unemployment can be overcome only if government expands or intervenes; but these are the political moves which are so unpopular in America of the late 20th century. What areas of employment expansion are there which can legitimately occur? I will suggest three.

1. *Education.* The prevailing ideology regards the expansion of education as a technological imperative of the modern economy. The belief that education is responding to the technological upgrading of work does not fit the sociological evidence; education has expanded so massively in the United States, beyond any other society in world history, not because of technological demand but as a decentralized and democratized competition over credentials of social status (Collins 1979). It is not so much that the job structure drives education but the reverse; there has been so much pressure for expanding administrative and professional jobs in the United States because competition over educational credentials has raised aspirations for social responsibility. The fact that we have a contest mobility system for individuals should not obscure the overall structure: the more people who compete for educational credentials, the higher become the conventional educational requirements for jobs. It is an illusion to assume that inner-city ghettos can be emptied and poverty eradicated if every youth can be made to finish high school; if a high school diploma becomes universal (it is currently attained by about 84% of the youth cohort; *Statist. Abstr.* 1992: Nos. 221, 223), its value on the job market becomes zero. The value of the undergraduate degree (now attained by about 25%) has already become a bare minimum of middle-class employment, and it is foreseeable that in the future, it will be so widespread as to offer no advantage in the job market. The value of any given level of education becomes the ticket it provides to more advanced schooling. In the last decade, we saw entry requirements for business management positions escalate to specialized postgraduate degrees; when this level of educational credentials fills up, it is predictable that still higher educational requirements will emerge.

In the past, I have criticized the inflationary market for educational credentials as a hidden form of stratification; if one is pursuing the ideal of reducing social inequality, decredentialing jobs and eliminating the inflationary educational marketplace would be structurally necessary. I say this in full recognition that a certain amount of individual mobility takes place through the school system; but the overall level of intergenerational mobility has not changed, despite massive expansion in the school system, since the 1920s, and educational expansion does nothing to change the distribution of wealth and occupational inequality. Culturally, too, we have paid a price; along with credential inflation has come grade inflation and declining intellectual content of learning (as we know from achievement test scores). The prevailing cynicism among students about education is hardly surprising; they are aware that the sheer numbers of credits and a person's relative standing in the queue of degree levels is what determines his/her career, and that the content taught in classrooms is a temporary commodity needed only for passing the course.

For all the negative things that can be said about an inflationary educational system, it does have one structural virtue: it is a Keynesian system which absorbs displaced labor. Unemployment levels would reach unprecedented heights if decredentialing were ever to take place; the 13.7 million undergraduate and post-

graduate students, and the 900,000 faculty and proportional numbers of clerical workers and administrators whose positions hinge upon this population could not be absorbed if the educational system were abolished (*Statis. Abstr.* 1992: Nos. 210, 212, 236). Adding any substantial portion of the 16.5 million high school students and 2 million high school employees would have similar effects. (To gauge the immensity of the problem, the total labor force is about 120 million, and unemployment about eight million; *Statis. Abstr.* 1992: No. 608). I am arguing that the evidence shows that if technological efficiency were the only consideration, the economy could survive and prosper with a much smaller proportion of highly educated employees, but it could not survive the Keynesian problem of unemployment and depressed demand.

For this reason, I have come to think even that it may be socially disruptive to criticize the prevailing technologist ideology about the necessity of a highly educated workforce. After all, the acceptance of this ideology helps to legitimate public expenditure on education, almost the lone sector of legitimate Keynesian spending in today's political climate. (But no, I do not think I will censor my sociological opinions on this point; the interests in favor of expanding education are strong enough to withstand the truth about what they are doing, and very few people pay attention to sociology anyway.) In the tax revolt and budgetary crises of the 1990s, even school spending is being cut back, although it remains a little more sacrosanct than other areas of government spending. In the medium and long run, and indeed even in the short run, I would expect education to continue to expand. It is essential as a Keynesian prop for the modern economy; in fact, the future increase in technological displacement of employment—the full impact of artificial intelligence and robotization in the future—will make it necessary for the school system to absorb people for even longer segments of their life-span.

This will happen, even with a reluctance to increase government spending, because educational status credentials have become central to the stratification system. This means that not only the society as a whole, but individuals within it, have an interest in high levels of education. Families who seek elite jobs for their children have no alternative but to finance them through the longest sequence of schooling currently required by the inflationary credential market. Since the educational requirements for jobs will not stay stable, it will be necessary for job seekers at every level except the lowest to keep up their level of schooling to fit with the majority of job seekers. It is for this reason that colleges and professional schools can get away with raising their tuition, and publicly funded higher education with throwing an increasing burden onto student fees. Earlier in the school sequence, at high school and even elementary levels, there is a push toward private schools. Current political debates envision that access may be paid by tax-supported public vouchers; but given the tax revolt and the tendency towards fiscal crisis, it is predictable that schooling at that level, too, will increasingly depend upon private financing. If, indeed, private elementary and secondary schools offer individuals a leg up in the scramble for educational credentials, we can expect that the contest over status

attainment will motivate families who can afford it to invest in the private educational sector. The upshot is that we may well get an expansion of the Keynesian, excess-labor-absorbing effects of education, but financed increasingly by private investment. The linking of educational credentials to stratification thus gives private incentives for systemic benefits.

The mass inflationary credential-producing education of the future may not be very pleasant to live in, especially if one is an educator who values cultural ideals or an egalitarian ideology. Nevertheless, it is a solution to the structural crisis in employment, and it appeals to the material interests of educators, since it makes their jobs structurally indispensable.

2. **Medical care.** The 1992 presidential campaign made a central issue out of the escalating costs of medical care in the United States and their contribution to government budgetary crisis. At the same time, President Clinton has proposed to expand medical coverage, on the principle of universal social equity. Of the two goals, it is much more likely that universal medical care can be established than that costs can be contained. The medical system is a massive and complex linkage among bureaucratic organizations, including hospitals, governments, employers, insurance companies, producers of drugs and medical technology, and the medical professions. The sociology of organizations shows that expanding bureaucracies is a much more normal process than reducing them; typically, efforts to reform are implemented by adding bureaucratic rules and administrators, which tends to compound the problem. All these are reasons why I suggest it is sociologically realistic to expect that containing medical costs will not likely happen.

If the central problem in the modern economy, however, is the Keynesian one, the expansion of the medical care system appears in a different light. Currently 12 percent of the U.S. GNP goes into health care (*Statist. Abstr.* 1992: No. 135), figures which are the highest in the world; but is this surprising for a society which is now the longest-standing, in effect the most mature, industrial economy in the world? If the United States is the most advanced industrial society, it should also be the one which has the most severe Keynesian problem of employment displacement and the greatest implicit demand for job creation and withdrawing persons from the labor force. From this point of view, is it really a bad thing that in a few years 20 percent of the GNP may go into medicine? The demand for advanced medical supplies, therapies, and technologies may be the real growth industry of the twenty-first century. It is not entirely facetious to imagine a society, of 50 or 100 years from now, when half the population are patients (thus safely out of the labor force) and the other half is employed caring for them. And whatever the precise proportions turn out to be, it is very likely that expansion of the medical sector will continue, precisely because the United States is a wealthy and advanced society. As in the case of further expanding the educational credential system, the structural reality will go along with an ideological disgruntlement, and a good deal of fiscal pulling and hauling as to who must pay for the system. But this kind of financial



conflict is likely the form that class conflict will take in the Keynesian society of the future.

**3. The judicial system.** A third area in which structural expansion is under way is the complex made up of the law courts, crime and justice administration, police, prisons, and all the other aspects of civil and criminal litigation. As in the case of the medical system, the expansion of judicial activities is perceived as highly undesirable by almost everyone. In part, we see this as the problem of crime, of lack of police and social control; in part, it is the issue of the explosion of litigation and the overcrowding of the courts. All these play into the fiscal crisis of government; police, prisons, and court expenses are strains on state budgets; so are the expanded liability of states to suits on a host of safety, environmental, and discrimination issues.

Again, we can turn the issue around. From the viewpoint of mitigating the Keynesian problem, an expansion in criminal justice processing and of civil litigation is a way of absorbing technologically displaced workers. Structurally, the judicial system is part of the tertiary sector; its expansion is in keeping with the shift from extraction to direct production to administration and services. It may well be the case that this part of the tertiary sector is a sink for resources, absorbing production from elsewhere and using it up in conflict. But this is one of the Keynesian virtues of conflict; conflict is not productive and, in fact, it destroys resources. That is why conflict diminishes when it reaches the limits set up by available resources for mobilizing conflict groups. But if a person exists in an economy in which the basic structural problem centers on excess technological capacity, underemployment, and underconsumption, a very high level of conflict not only can be tolerated but is structurally useful in keeping up economic demand. Furthermore, we have seen the general principle that conflict can keep going longest when it is mild rather than severe, when it is institutionalized at moderate levels, with small amounts of violence and large amounts of organizational maneuvering. Abstracting from our normal concerns about crime and justice, it can be seen that the judicial system operates as just such a mechanism of chronic, institutionalized conflict.

In a Keynesian future which depends heavily upon the judicial system to absorb excess labor, it can be imagined that we could all be lawyers, suing each other. The grounds for law suits are numerous and expanding; every form of conflict mobilization, mentioned earlier, can be manifested in litigation. In addition to the usual range of business suits, there is a widening range for actions over gender discrimination, sexual harassment (and suits for false accusations of the same); ethnic, religious, and sexual preference conflicts; medical malpractice of various kinds, from lack of treatment to overtreatment; even educational malpractice is becoming established as a form of litigation, likely to expand as the competitive credentialed market becomes regarded in a more cynical light. The expansion of litigation can be an adjunct to expansion of the other two Keynesian sectors I have suggested; the more excess capacity is absorbed in massive educational and medical systems, the



more conflict groups find resource niches within these systems and the more conflict they can generate for the judicial system. The several Keynesian sectors, thus, can structurally support one another. Again, as in the case of education and medicine, the Keynesian sector can expand even without government funding, for in every case there are widespread private interests which have material incentives to pursue their advantage there. Private litigation is one of the main sources of growth in the judicial Keynesian system. (Another linkage with education is, of course, that as the competition over higher degrees produces more lawyers, there will be more professionals who seek out areas of litigation.)

On the public side, criminal justice remains one of the few areas where government spending has popular support. Ideological fervor about the crime menace meshes within the dominant rhetoric of politicians' careers. To be sure, this clashes with material realities of government budgets in meeting the demands of expensive lobbies such as the police and prison guards. Nevertheless, an expensive and expansionary criminal justice system provides another solution to the Keynesian problem. Criminals are taken out of the labor force (where they occupied occupations not usually counted in the statistics in any case), while police officers, prosecutors, guards, and auxiliary personnel build up the part of the labor force that which cannot be displaced by automation and computerization. It is possible to imagine another Keynesian scenario, a very unpleasant one to be sure, in which the population was divided between security guards and narcotics agents, on one hand, and everyone else who are their suspects. To this, we can likely in a few years add a newly specialty, antismoking detectives, who will come into being when tobacco is criminalized. Thus, we could solve the Keynesian problem by moving toward an ultra-policed society. As is well known, the vicious circles set in motion by policing and incarceration tend to reproduce the criminal underclass, and there is every reason to expect that an expansion of policing, and criminalizing new activities and substances, will perpetuate the social division between a criminal class and a criminal-controlling class (no doubt with a certain amount of mobility between them). But Keynesian institutions thrive on self-perpetuating problems. If crime were ever eliminated, then the system would truly be in a crisis of manufacturing employment for no-longer-needed criminal justice personnel. Here, again, we see a structural complimentary between the Keynesian economy and a society with a proliferation of fragmented conflicts. The police sector exists in symbiosis with its enemies; the war against crime, like the anti-drug crusade, is the domestic equivalent of the Cold War. As military expenditure drops with a decline in international threat, we may expect the domestic version to expand to take up the employment slack.

The scenarios I have drawn are no doubt exaggerated. Structurally, there is no need for education, medicine, and the judicial system all to expand to their maxima; expansion of one can compensate for another, as far as their Keynesian effects go. And the productive sector of the economy, where real goods and services are created, will never go away, even though that is a sector where technological

displacement creates the source of the Keynesian problem. Overall, I would expect that there will be some mixture of expansion in the "Keynesian superstructure" of the educational credential system, medical care, and judiciary. It will not be a smooth expansion, since financial costs are not extracted without struggle; nevertheless, their long-term expansion is the only direction in which a viable economy is going to exist in the expectable future.

## CONCLUSION

What can sociologists contribute to this situation? From one perspective, we are as much a part of the overall social situation as any other occupation. We have an interest in expanding the educational system, and we provide some of the mobilizing resources for particular interest groups to fuel their conflicts and, increasingly, take part as expert witness in their litigation. Sociology can expand along with the rest of the Keynesian superstructure, and provide another stand in its ideologies.

I would hope for something more. Sociology offers something virtually no one else has in our society: a clear sight of the pattern beyond the local viewpoints of the various participants. Remember the general principle: conflict produces ideological blinders, a moral glorification of one's own side, and a demonizing of one's enemies. Participants in conflicts are unable to see the dynamics that envelop them, especially the process of mutual escalation that locks enemies together and puts their fates in each other's hands.

What the sociology of conflict reveals is a word of mixed costs and benefits. In the spiral of conflicts, no one wins absolutely; even victors find that the situation after the battle is unlike what they anticipated in their utopian battle-slogans. If sociologists have something to offer, it is their capacity to rise above particular viewpoints. We need to expose the trade-offs that are possible, the alternative pathways between winning one part of an issue and paying its price in hidden consequences. We need to introduce some realism into a world of multiple conflict groups with their ideological expectations of utopias and their allegedly cost-free policies. That is not to say sociologists may not be motivated to take sides; realistically, sometimes we can agree to push a militant policy, but with our eyes open, being willing to pay its price.

In the society of the turn of the twenty-first century, with its gridlock of fragmented conflict groups, sociologists can make their biggest contribution by playing a new role: cooling down the most heated and destructive conflicts, by offering insights about the dynamics that envelop the contending sides. Marx and Engels, initiators of conflict theory, were by no means blind partisans; they believed in understanding the truth about the structures of the world. For them, there was no contradiction between revealing the truth and being a partisan for one side in the social struggle; they hoped that the truth of their theory coincided with the future victory of the maximally liberating side. We have the burden of greater sophistica-

tion. We know that mobilizing ourselves into all-out conflict leads to the heady strengths of emotional solidarity, but also to demonizing one's enemies and to loss of perspective. Sociologists have the hardest task, maintaining simultaneously commitment and insight.

#### NOTE

1. Several related theoretical principles have been established in recent years of sociological research. The state-breakdown theory of revolutions, developed by Skocpol (1979) and Goldstone (1991), among others, hinges upon the ways in which a dominant state organization loses its resources for maintaining its own internal cohesion and for coercing others. Related to this is Tilly's formulation of the resource mobilization theory of social movements, and much subsequent research on social movement organizations (Tilly 1978). The expanding and contracting power of states in the world arena is explained by principles of geopolitical theory, which may be seen as involving a number of corollaries to these principles about the material mobilization of interests relative to rivals (Collins 1978, 1986; Kennedy 1987).

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