

Znebejánek, F. *Mezi konfliktem a kooperací.
Jednotná teorie konfliktu a kooperace.*
Praha: Sociologické nakladatelství (SLON), 2013

Between Conflict and Cooperation. Unified Theory of Conflict and Cooperation

Summary

Towards the end of the 1950s, two models of society were institutionalized in sociological theory – the model of coercion and the model of solidarity, the basics of which were outlined by R. Dahrendorf. Dahrendorf thus brought a tension into sociology which to this day has not been successfully overcome, and sociological thinking has been unable to find a unity between divergent and convergent social processes. This book attempts to unify them by introducing a unified theory of conflict and cooperation.

“Dahrendorf’s opposites”, as the opposites of coercion and solidarity may be called, represent only one of the possible relationships between divergent and convergent group processes. The unified theory represents another variant. The success of this attempt at building the theory is largely dependent on the concepts we place in mutual opposition, and on the perspective from which we view them. It seems that the opposites of divergent and convergent processes can be erased if they are considered to be conflicting and cooperative behaviour, and if we regard both these types of behaviour from an interactionist perspective, as they are viewed by the unified theory of conflict and cooperation.

The unified theory of conflict and cooperation as a variant of the relationship between divergent and convergent processes is greatly inspired by Simmel’s reflections on the unity of the opposites of peace and war. However, Simmel’s concept of peace and war is rather of a philosophical than a sociological nature, and it thus fails to deal sufficiently with the social processes that create the unity of peace and war.

The unified theory of conflict and cooperation therefore operates with more specific social processes, through which it is possible to link divergent and convergent processes; in sociological terms this thus deepens Simmel’s perspective on the issue.

If the attempt at a unified theory of conflict and cooperation is to be successful, it must meet the following requirements:

- I. Define concepts standing in opposition;
- II. Explain the concept of the unity of opposites;
- III. Conceive an equivalent relationship between the two opposites;
- IV. Explain the movement of intergroup behaviour between the two opposites.

The formulation of these requirements will help decide whether the critical responses to the unified theory of conflict and cooperation are to be targeted at the inconsistency of the answers to them, the adequacy of the requirements themselves or the basis from which they were derived.

The unified theory of conflict and cooperation is based on several assumptions that are captured in the following paragraphs.

1. The unified theory of conflict and cooperation contains the thoughts of several authors, regardless of their starting points. The final product of this methodological strategy may be called "pragmatic theory". Such a theory is not primarily about maintaining the purity of the starting points, but rather about the most effective solution to a particular problem.
2. People have a natural tendency to bring order into their environment. According to Berger and Luckmann, building a social order is one of the fundamental features of human existence. People can build order in several ways. One such method is conflictual behaviour, the second type of behaviour is cooperative. Conflictual and cooperative behaviour can thus be considered to be more or less conscious tools, through which people attempt to realise their conceptions of a legitimate social order. Conflictual or cooperative behaviour is perceptibly not congenital. It can be understood as a learned adaptation strategy.
3. The unified theory of conflict and cooperation is based on a simplified situation of a single existing complex of conflictual or cooperative behaviour. In real situations, however, people often participate in several conflict and cooperative situations simultaneously.
4. The unified theory of conflict and cooperation is primarily focused on intergroup behaviour. However, in many situations the mutual behaviour of groups cannot be explained unless we consider the processes taking place in each group individually. The unified theory of conflict and cooperation thus takes into account the relationship between intragroup and intergroup processes, and pays due attention to them.

5. The unified theory of conflict and cooperation deals with transformations of conflict into cooperation and cooperation into conflict only on the level of social groups, which limits the range of its validity. The formulation of a general theory of conflict and cooperation, which might explain behaviour also at an inter-individual level, would require a deeper insight into the issue of divergent and convergent social processes.

Conflict or cooperation begins with the process of individual design of conduct, which is conceived in this book as a reconstruction of Blumer's theory of interpretation. This reconstruction is based on a dialectical relationship between the situation, individual identity, structure of individual action and an actor's actions. In this process, an actor, through his current identity, identifies important aspects of events, interprets them, constructs the possibilities of his actions, subjectively decides on the most acceptable variant of behaviour, and then takes action.

The construction of individual identity, which takes place in parallel with the design of one's conduct, proceeds in four stages, namely the identification of the actor's experience with their own actions, the interpretation of the current identity, the design of variants of future identity and the identification of the actor with a particular variant. Identity is fundamentally of a fluid nature; in addition to highly variable parts, however, it also contains more stable structures that form the actual core of the identity. The design of one's behaviour and the design of one's individual identity are thus two mutually interacting processes.

Actors find themselves in a situation in which they encounter individual objects of the situation – sources for conduct, rules of conduct and power influences that they may deem helpful to or restricting of their intentions.

Traditional interactionist approaches to the behaviour of an individual actor deal with an interpretation of the situation, as is the case with Blumer's theory, or the actor's choice of rational behaviour, which is dealt with e.g. by Coleman. The unified theory of conflict and cooperation brings together both perspectives through a concept of the design of conduct by an individual actor. According to this theory, actors, during the process of designing their actions, take into account the possibility and attraction of an interest-based or symbolic connection with others, and create an interest-based or symbolic identity with them.

The unified theory of conflict and cooperation assumes that both types of individual connections meet in Melucci's concept of the formation of collective identity and its behaviour, which emphasizes the role of organization

and symbolic resources. By means of a collective identity, individual actors assess the possibilities and limitations of their actions within the context of external conditions, and interpret their behaviour towards another group as conflicting or cooperative.

The unified theory of conflict and cooperation also shows how the actor's design of his conduct is associated with his conception of an ideal image of the world and, as a result, with the conflicting and cooperative behaviour through which this conception is created or maintained.

Both forms of action – conflict and cooperation – are conceived as sets of interactions designed by individuals forming a collective identity. This concept of conflict and cooperation provides hope for a unification of the two opposites, by means of the actors' ability to design his behaviour. Conflict and cooperation are thus interpretations of situations by actors within an environment of collective identity, rather than the result of a fixed structure. These interpretations may, as mental structures, oscillate between conflicting and cooperative behaviour, since they are an effect of the ability of consciousness to overcome theoretically contradictory positions. This idea of a unified theory of conflict and cooperation meets the requirement of unity of opposites, i.e. requirement II.

Both forms of behaviour – conflictual and cooperative – can be understood as a unity of opposites in terms of Simmel's theory. If, however, Simmel's inspiration is to be developed into a sociological theory, it must emphasize the social processes governing this unity. Part of the unified theory of conflict and cooperation is therefore a model of transformations of intergroup behaviour, which was greatly inspired by the reflections of Spector and Kitsuse on the model of the natural history of social problems.

The model employs two forms of intergroup behaviour – conflict and cooperation. Every form of behaviour can occur in two types, and the model thus contains irreconcilable conflict, solvable conflict, enforced cooperation and voluntary cooperation. Through this concept of intergroup behaviour, the unified theory of conflict and cooperation responds to the first of the set requirements (requirement I), i.e. the definition of concepts standing in mutual opposition. Neither conflict nor cooperation is the primary state of social action, a kind of cause of contradictory behaviour. The theory of conflict and cooperation thus meets the requirement of equality between opposites, i.e. requirement III.

The model of transformations of intergroup behaviour refers to specific processes which can be seen behind Simmel's rather abstract conceptual structure of the unity of opposites. Each transformation of intergroup behaviour – the transformation of conflict into cooperation and cooperation

into conflict – is thus expressed in individual phases, through which specific group behaviour may or may not go.

The model of transformations of behaviour therefore constitutes a system of phases of intergroup behaviour, which may or may not take place in reality. It offers not only a sociological conception of the unity of divergent and convergent intergroup processes, but also a tool for analysis of historical and current situations. The model of transformations of behaviour thus responds to requirement IV – explain the movement of intergroup behaviour between the two opposites.

The unified theory of conflict and cooperation does not exclude the possibility of constructing a different variant of interactionist theory, unifying divergent and convergent intergroup processes. Neither does it rule out a variant based on structuralist ideas. It is possible that a similar role as that played by consciousness in the unified theory of conflict and cooperation could be played by the changing external conditions in some kind of structuralist theory.

The main reason for the efforts to build a unified theory of conflict and cooperation is the belief that such a theory is a more efficient tool for analysing real processes than just a theory of conflict or just a theory of cooperation. One of the main advantages of the unified theory of conflict and cooperation is its ability to explain the transformation of conflict into cooperation and cooperation into conflict within a single explanatory framework. There is thus no need to operate two theories that have to be alternated in the interpretation of certain events, depending on which stage or level we intend to explain. We can also avoid problems resulting from the fact that we have chosen one of them as the methodological basis and that as a result we encounter difficulties upon interpreting contradictory behaviour.

Another advantage lies in the ability of the unified theory of conflict and cooperation to take into account the historical dimension of the analyzed events. Theories based on the primary role of either divergent or convergent processes are usually unable to appreciate the history that precedes these phenomena, i.e. conflict or cooperation, and they thus fail to identify the processes through which the past significantly influences the present. The unified theory of conflict and cooperation, on the other hand, very strongly emphasizes the historical dimension inherent in such processes. Without knowing the history of these movements, it is often difficult to understand the current behaviour of actors.

Actors must have somehow arrived at conflict situations, and the history of their mutual cooperative behaviour is reflected in the development of the current conflictual behaviour. What has been said about the move from co-

operation to conflict is of course also true of the opposite movement – from conflict to cooperation. Knowing the history of the conflict helps to provide a better understanding of the conduct leading to cooperation, e.g. initial distrust among actors. A knowledge of the history of cooperation, on the contrary, helps to understand e.g. low levels of violence in conduct heading towards a deep conflict. The unified theory of conflict and cooperation helps to take into account the links between the past and the present, much more so than a mere theory of conflict or theory of cooperation.

The unified theory of conflict and cooperation was inspired by several authors. It combines some elements of their theories, often at the price of a rejection of the starting points on which they are based. However, the theory was designed with the aim at combining these elements with new, consistent starting points. This methodological strategy allows the theory to meet four requirements imposed upon it. The unified theory of conflict and consensus is not just a set of concepts structuring a complex reality. It also offers a tool for empirical research, since it shows what it is possible to look for in empirical evidence, and how to organize empirical findings.

frantisek.znebejanek@upol.cz