

# CONFLICT AND COOPERATION IN MACRO THEORY AND PRACTICE

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It's a truism that we use negotiations to conclude conflicts in social life, albeit unconditional surrender is the rare exception to the rule. Consider the gamut, from marriages to wars.

The potential for successful negotiations to end conflicts is often thought to hinge, in turn, entirely on bargaining over *resources*. Wars are seen to conclude with the redrawing of national boundaries, marriages end with property settlements.

But suggested here by example and theoretical explanation is the possibility that conflict resolution between organizations may depend at least as much on whether each organization's ideological *reality* of the other(s) in the conflict is an accurate reflection of their *resource* disparity.

## CYCLE OF COOPERATION, COMPETITION, CONFLICT, AND NEGOTIATION

Imagine a relationship between a small, loose-knit organization of tenants and a public housing authority, a relationship in which there is cooperation but not equality. That is to say, the tenants understand their relative powerlessness and rarely if ever approach the housing officials with requests for more than what can be had for the asking. The relationship between tenant leaders and housing authority officials is "friendly and cooperative," although with an undercurrent of resentment on the tenants' side and arrogance on the housing authority side.

Now imagine that the tenants' organization has an influx of new members and several gifted leaders emerge, while simultaneously their housing conditions worsen. Assume too that with new, improved leadership, the tenants' organization becomes more disciplined. As the organization becomes more powerful—its command of resources growing—there is a palpable tension among the membership about the way tenants and their organization are being treated by the housing authority.

A few members within the tenants' organization begin to agitate for radical action. Conscious of their increased capacity, they press to have the organization exercise its influence in ways that will materially improve their housing. Countervailing this momentum is the inertia of most other tenants, even members of the tenants' organization, based

on their fear of confrontation and retribution in the form of eviction by the housing authority.

The inertia is often rationalized, however, with popular ideas about why grassroots community organizations engage, more or less, in cooperation and conflict. It's commonly said that conflict is chosen by individual players as a matter of personal style, psychological need, or political ideology—and therefore should be avoided because it's not likely to serve the practical self-interests of most people. Or, to the contrary, that the emergence of a particular form of action is invariably the result of "bigger social forces"—and therefore it's futile for common people to attempt to influence such matters.

While thoughtful arguments have been made for each of these ideas, macro practitioners find it more useful to understand cooperation and conflict as the outcomes of relationship dynamics occurring between organizations and institutions in the organizational field of action. Thus they see the potential for grassroots organizations to have significant influence through their campaigns and actions.

Community organizers typically employ several methodologies to help members of grassroots organizations overcome their resistance to confrontation and conflict, simultaneously reducing the potential for destructive outcomes. Not demonizing officials who may become organizational opponents, but acknowledging that they represent adverse institutional interests *and* that they are "human beings who deserve to be treated with civility and respect," frequently has the effect of displacing inhibitions about confrontation and conflict. Organizing "research actions," which afford the opportunity to meet with decision-makers and "take their measure" before confronting them with specific demands, reinforces the value of self-discipline when engaged in conflict. And leadership training that focuses on overall campaign development, including negotiations, helps to create a more grounded perspective.

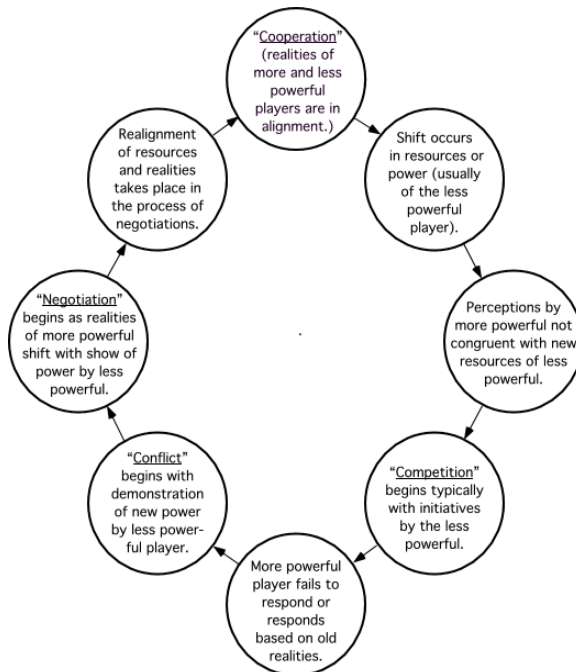
In the best of circumstances, the momentum based on confidence that confrontation and conflict can be constructive offsets the inertia based on fear that they will be destructive. The tension, then, that begins with the tenants' increased capacity, leads to an active "competition." The tenants' organization begins to marshal its resources—both

material resources and the resources that enable it to influence wider ideological realities (e.g., with other non-member tenants, the media, and local politicians)—in order to influence institutional decision-making. The goal ultimately is to win campaigns on issues that will both relieve pressures and realize hopes, and that will build the capacity of tenants' organization itself.

On the one hand, if initially the differential in resources between the tenants and the housing authority allows the tenants to demonstrate sufficient power to give the housing authority a stake in negotiations, the competition may lead directly to resolution of issues and some shift in realities. (We will return to the idea of shifting realities momentarily.)

On the other hand, if the resource and power differential is substantial and there is no hope of getting the housing authority into good-faith negotiations, the tendency will be to move toward conflict. That is, it will be necessary for the tenants to demonstrate their organizational power—their ability to impose costs on the housing authority—as a precondition to achieving negotiations. The conflict isn't for its own sake but to create incentives for the other side to negotiate in good faith, to reach an agreement that resolves the issue.

### Cycle of Cooperation, Competition, Conflict, and Negotiation



There is, then, a discernable cycle of cooperation, competition, conflict, and negotiation in which these two organizations are engaged. These cyclical stages, along with the shifts in realities that link them, are illustrated in the diagram above. In

the first instance of cooperation, we note that the shift in the tenants' resources leads to competition when the "perceptual reality of [the] more powerful [housing authority is] not congruent with [the] new resources of the less powerful [tenants' organization]." The transition from competition to conflict reflects a similar failure to appreciate new realities. And, lastly, the transition from conflict to negotiation typically reflects a demonstration of power that compels the acceptance of new realities.

### THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Why do macro practitioners need theoretical understanding of this cycle of conflict and cooperation? Theoretical understanding is useful for many reasons. Foremost among them is that we advance our knowledge and skill as organizers through praxis, by the interplay of practice and reflection—a continuous give and take between what we do and our systematic thinking about what we do. Theory for macro practice isn't for its own sake but to guide action, especially in new and unexpected situations, when we have no prior experience, preparation, or knowledge. Theory also enables us to better analyze past and current events, and to make predictions about the future. Theory allows us to derive practice roles, hypotheses (testable propositions), and methodologies for achieving specific organizing objectives.

### Field of Social Action

Every theory needs a central concept that encompasses the "universe" to be explained, connecting all of its components. Because the idea of a *field of social action*<sup>1</sup> reflects the main facets of organizing life, it's the centerpiece of this theory. The theoretical definition of the action field includes individuals and collectivities (groups, organizations, and institutions), their social processes, structures, and objectives. The theory accounts for the dynamics of power and ideology in the political economy, and, in doing so, its action-field definition distills from psychology, sociology, and political-economics, the analytical and methodological tools for macro practice.

The *pivotal* purpose of every organization in the action field of political economy is survival. Organizations must gather resources over and above their costs, to ensure continued life and growth. They seek resources to secure their domain and to achieve autonomy and movement toward their goals. And their field of action is animated by the cycle of cooperation, competition, conflict, and negotiation over scarce resources.

The action field has two significant dimensions for which we need theoretical explanations. These are: (1) *relations of power*—the building up and expenditure of resources, with adjustments effected by cooperation, competition, conflict, and

negotiation; and (2) *ideological realities*—valued expectations about social action, including shared understandings about allied, neutral, and opposing players, their actions and the consequences that flow from them.

Three paradigmatic social science theories are drawn together here to describe the action field. The foundation is *social learning* theory,<sup>2</sup> because all human activity is an extension of individual behavior. Learning theory covers the main psychological factors that account for *individual* behavior: environmental cues that are prior to action, cognition (thinking and knowing), and rewarding and punishing consequences that follow action.

To avoid explaining sociological processes with psychological theory, and building directly on the behavioral principles of social learning, we employ *social exchange* theory.<sup>3</sup> Exchange theory elaborates the sociology of *collective* action, especially the acquisition of resources and power, and injustices in their distribution.

While both learning and exchange theories admit the importance of shared, valued ideas that are linked to centers of power—usually called ideologies—they often leave this realm unexplored, taking its effects as given but beyond their purview. Theory for *social construction of reality*<sup>4</sup> makes it possible to connect ideology with learning and exchange—and thus to propose a dialectic of social action. (In the language of community organizing, rough approximations of these theoretical categories are *values*, which are equivalent to ideologi-

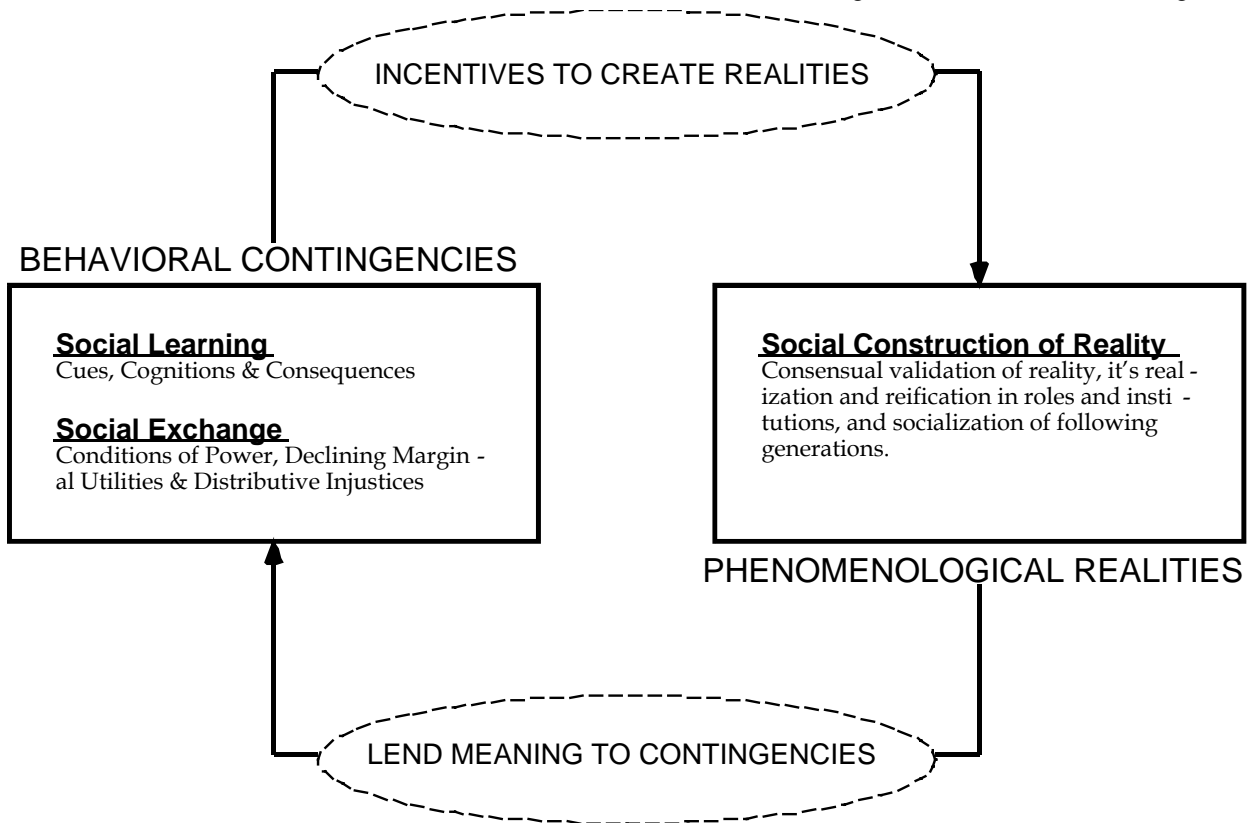
cal realities, and *self-interests*, which are equivalent to learning and exchange contingencies.)

The action-field strands of power and ideology are interwoven in a seamless web. That is, our resources—mainly people and money—are valued not only for their direct effects, but also for broader influence, both within our own organizations and beyond. We use them to create shared ideologies (i.e., phenomenological realities) that define our allies and opponents, good and evil, winning and losing.

As already noted, relationships between organizations and institutions in the action field may be cooperative, competitive, conflicting, or in negotiation, and they are invariably in transition from one stage to another. Contrary to the popular view of the urban political economy as unorganized and chaotic, through this theoretical lens the action field appears comparatively stable and patterned. Much of the “coordination” is not by way of formal institutional arrangements but through realignments that result from competition and conflict. This activity appears as coordination only when we have an overview of the entire field of action. Because the coordination occurs largely in competition and conflict, it appears that most of the permanent cooperative arrangements are symbolic, reflecting long-term resource and power disparities.

#### ***Dialectic of Social Action***

To understand social action, it’s helpful to see that commonly we experience events as good or bad because of ideologies that define their meanings.



We create the ideologies, in our shared history and language experience. Yet the everyday behavior required to construct ideologies doesn't happen without sufficiently attractive incentives, a variety of circumstances on which our learning and exchange are contingent, and which in turn are themselves invested with value by ideologies.

Social action is thus understood as the outcome of a dialectical relationship (as diagrammed above)—continuing and complementary interaction—between behavioral contingencies and phenomenological realities. The contingencies of learning and exchange—people, events, objects, even our own behavior, on which our action is contingent—are regarded as rewarding or punishing, profitable or costly, according to our socially constructed ideologies. For the collective acts of ideology construction to continue, there must be explicit learning and exchange contingencies, such as cues, cognition, consequences, conditions of power, distributive injustices, and so on.

It goes round and round: not only are both contingencies and ideologies operating, they are inseparable in social life, and explanations of organizational action are incomplete without reference to their dialectical relationship.

This explanation of social action, based on empirically grounded behavioral and phenomenological theories, provides a foundation for explaining the cycle of cooperation, competition, conflict, and negotiation. The cycle may be understood theoretically, for purposes of macro practice, as a response to the dialectical relationship between (1) *behavioral contingencies of learning and exchange*, and (2) *socially constructed ideological realities*.

## **IDEOLOGY & POWER IN ORGANIZATIONAL LIFE**

It is important when beginning to examine the cycle of cooperation, competition, conflict, and negotiation not to confuse stability in the field of organizational action with some notion of “balance.” There may be some form of “cooperation” between master and slave, between powerful institution and weak grassroots organization, but such relationships do not reflect equality of resources and power.

### ***Ideological Realities & Power Disparities***

Balance can usefully be said to exist only in the sense that *each organization's ideological definition of the other is an accurate reflection of their resource and power disparity*, and thus there is a tendency toward stability in their relationship

Our example of grassroots conflict and cooperation shows that a gap grew up between the housing authority's ideological definition of the tenants' organization and the tenants' actual power.

To the extent that realities and resources (or power) between the parties were no longer congruent, that is, that their socially constructed ideological definitions of each other no longer fit their actual resource positions, an imbalance or “tension” was created that tended toward competition. The advent of this tension can be traced to resource shifts, planned or occurring unexpectedly, such that relationships between the parties—the ways in which they define each other—no longer correspond to actual resource and power disparities.

### ***Essentials of Conflict Resolution***

Successful negotiations require a recognition that both parties must win, must have some of their needs met, except in the case of “unconditional surrender,” which is virtually unheard of in the world of community organization. But successful negotiations also require a reduction of power disparity: it is the building and demonstration of power that creates the essential incentive, moving the parties toward negotiations.

This is true because the essence of negotiation is bargaining of resources based on each side's perception of the other's resource leverage and ability to control wider realities. Thus a major stumbling block to resolution of issues in negotiation, particularly in instances of a first negotiation between the parties, is the unwillingness or incapacity of the previously dominant party to experience a shift in attitude about the previously subordinate party's capacity to exercise power and impose costs.

The key to conflict resolution—recognizing that all such resolution is temporary—in many instances is a shift in realities. In effect, each side's ideological definition of the other must be realigned to more accurately reflect their actual resource and power positions.

When the conflict between the tenants and the housing authority has reached a stage of resolution, the tenants' organization has certainly won concessions on its issues, itself a shift in resources. But it has also achieved for itself and its opponent a new ideological definition of itself as an organizational actor, and it has established a new relationship based on that definition. No longer is the tenant organization seen as powerless, even witless. Its leaders have newly formed relationships of mutual respect with the leadership of the housing authority. The housing authority's definition of them has changed, as has their definition of themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Kurt Lewin, *Field Theory in Social Science* (Harper & Row, 1951).

<sup>2</sup> Albert Bandura, *Social Learning Theory* (Prentice Hall, 1976).

<sup>3</sup> Peter M. Blau, *Exchange and Power in Social Life* (John Wiley & Sons, 1964).

<sup>4</sup> Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1967).

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