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The social-psychological study of conflict: Rejoinder to a critique

MORTON DEUTSCH
Teachers College, Columbia University

Abstract

This paper is a rejoinder to Plon's critique of the social psychology of conflict published in this Journal. The rejoinder reviews the history of American social psychology, the meaning of 'conflict resolution', the nature of the dilemma in the Prisoner's Dilemma, and other related matters which Plon has apparently misconstrued. The rejoinder criticizes Plon's crude 'economic determinism' version of Marxist theory and briefly considers the role of power in politics. The characteristics of the present author's social-psychological approach to conflict is outlined, and it is suggested that such an approach has direct relevance to the intellectual concerns of those who seek to bring about social change.

M. Plon, in his paper in this Journal, has preached a lengthy sermon from his pulpit in the temple of an orthodox sect of Marxism about the wayward path taken by social psychology in the study of conflict. Not, myself, being a true believer in any faith and a questioner of all orthodoxies, I do not feel obligated to take Plon's edicts and pronouncements as revealed truths simply because he invokes the names of the holy fathers, Marx and Engels, and the holy doctrine of historical materialism. I employ the religious analogy because Plon's critique, even in the few instances where he accurately states the position he is damning, is not based on evidence or even on theoretical analysis but rather largely consists of personal assertion supported by direct or implicit appeal to the sacred.

This kind of argumentation, because it masks itself behind current ideological virtues, is difficult to confront intellectually other than to expose its nature. If I were to use Plon's mode of argumentation on Plon's article, I would accuse him of vulgarizing Marxism in such a way as to justify Stalinism. I would assert that his article functions to create a false consciousness by helping to deaden the
sensitivities of workers and other groups to their oppression in systems which mask their exploitative and oppressiveness under the facade of collective ownership of the modes of production. I would quote Marx, Engels, Lenin or Mao on the dangers of a crude economic determinism such as Plon presents. Although the existence of Stalinism would give credibility to my argument, as would the many apt quotations from the sacred texts, I do not make this accusation against Plon. Nor will I undertake here an analysis of the social causes and consequences of the anachronistic resurgence of the vulgarized Marxism represented by Plon, which apparently has learned nothing from the history of the twentieth century.

Plon identifies himself as a Marxist. I view myself a marxist, freudian, lewinian, and meadian (to name several of the major influences on my work). I do not capitalize my marxism since I do not consider myself to be an uncritical disciple of any intellectual tradition. Nevertheless, I will attempt to show that my approach in social psychology has focused on issues that are central to marxist concerns. Before turning to a discussion of my approach, I would like to correct some of the many misconceptions that Plon presents in his paper.

The history of American social psychology

Plon asserts that conflict does not appear as an object of study until quite recently (1957-1958) in the social-psychological literature and that prior to this time it was consciously avoided by Lewin and other social psychologists in the United States. I must assume that Plon has little familiarity with American social psychology prior to 1957. Social psychology as an active area of scholarship emerged in the United States during the 1930s. This was a period characterized by economic depression, the rise of fascism and nazism in Europe, the development of industrial unions in the United States and the gradual onset of World War II. It was a period in which marxism was a major intellectual influence in intellectual circles and leading universities. I. F. Brown's *Psychology and the social order*, which combined a marxist and field-theory viewpoint, and E. Freeman's *Social psychology*, which was also marxist in orientation, were widely used textbooks in social psychology. The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI), which originated in the thirties, published works on industrial conflict, intergroup conflict, war and so forth. During the 1930s and 1940s, Lewin and his students were studying authoritarian leadership and making theoretical analyses of conflict; Adorno et al. were involved in extensive studies of authoritarianism; the Yale group (Dollard, Miller et al.) were doing wide-ranging studies of conflict of various sorts and published a theoretical analysis, *Frustration and aggression*, as well as empirical studies such as *Children of bondage*.

The central interest of social psychology in the study of conflict in its various forms continued into the early fifties. It was manifested in the theoretical and empirical work of Asch, Sherif and several of Lewin's students. My own work in this period included a study of interracial relations in different types of public housing, a study of the social-economic-political factors affecting housing for minority groups and a social-economic-psychological analysis of the nature of prejudice. These were in addition to my theoretical and empirical study of cooperation and competition. In the early 1950s, I also started my work on trust and suspicion with the Prisoner's Dilemma game.

Plon may not think much of the theoretical and empirical work that was done by American social psychologists on conflict prior to 1957, but to say that they avoided this topic is to reveal utmost ignorance of the history of social psychology. A more pertinent issue for Plon to have raised is why American social psychologists shifted their research from field studies of industrial and ethnic conflict to an almost predominant focus on laboratory studies. It would be too lengthy a digression in this article to analyze the causes of this shift (for such a discussion see my introductory chapter in Deutsch and Hornstein, in press), but the point that Plon misses is that the social-psychological study of conflict did not begin with the shift from the field to the laboratory.

The meaning of 'conflict resolution'

From his own caricature of the term 'conflict resolution', Plon fabricates an elaborate web of *non-sequiturs* in an attempt to support his charge that the social-psychological study of conflict is biased in favor of the *status quo*. If Plon had looked up the term 'resolution' in a good English dictionary or if he were familiar with the nuances of English usage, he would have realized that the term 'conflict resolution' has several meanings and is sufficiently inclusive to cover both the processes and consequences of conflict: The diminution or elimination of conflict is only one of many different possible consequences of the various types of conflict processes. Even without consulting a dictionary, by simply examining the contexts of the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* and various research studies labeled as 'conflict resolution', it would not have been difficult for Plon to discern that the term 'conflict resolution' is not employed in social psychology as a synonym for the 'elimination of conflict'.

Plon's confusion here reflects his tortuous effort to rationalize his own preconceived thesis, namely, that the study of conflict resolution masks the existence of real class conflict and thus serves to inhibit the possibly violent class struggle.
which may be necessary in the seizing of state power by the oppressed classes. The elements in his caricature of the social psychology of conflict include the incorrect attribution to this field of the views that: (1) Society presupposes the absence of conflict; (2) the psychological level is the foundation of all analyses of social reality; (3) the interpersonal relation is taken as the essence of 'society' and the basis of international relations; (4) war should be analyzed only in the abstract without regard to its concrete economic, political and historical realities; and (5) violence, war and, hence, revolutions are 'absolute evils'. Plon's caricature is condescending, and hence amusing, particularly because he implies that these views do not reflect 'evil intent' so much as an ideologically induced stupidity to which Americans are particularly prone.

'Society' and 'conflict'

The thesis that social psychologists view 'society' and 'conflict' as opposed concepts is not less absurd because such charges are by now tired clichés in a long-standing controversy between the 'conflict' and 'functionalist' or 'integrative' sociological approaches to society. Social psychologists, by and large, have not joined this futile debate because they have emphasized the mixed character of society: The mixture of cooperative and competitive or antagonistic interests that exists in all societies and in all social relations. They have been interested in issues which a marxist theorist should find of considerable relevance — e.g., what are the conditions which lead to the predominance of one or the other type of relatedness and what are the consequences of such predominance? Such questions are related to the marxist interest in understanding the preconditions of socialism and understanding the problems involved in maintaining cooperation in a cooperative system. Possibly, Plon considers that he has sufficient understanding of these issues; if so, it would be appropriate for him to share his knowledge.

The psychological level

Plon asserts that the psychological level is presented as the foundation of all analyses of social reality by social psychologists and that, for them, conflict does not exist unless it is 'perceived'. Here, Plon commits a non-sequitur and obscures his own position in a haze of moralizing and polemics. It is, of course, true that psychologists are interested in psychological phenomena — i.e., in what exists psychologically for the individuals being studied (and the term 'perceived' is often used as a poor shorthand for 'what exists psychologically'). It is a complete non-sequitur to conclude that because of this interest they are not interested in the determinants of what exists psychologically. Precisely because social psychologists are interested in perceived conflict, they have an interest in the social realities (including the realities of conflicting interests) which help to determine whether or not a social conflict is perceived and, if so, how it is perceived. Plon is murky about his own position, but the implication of his critique is that the social psychologist should not be concerned with understanding the processes by which an objective conflict of interest is turned into a perceived conflict, nor with understanding the conditions which give rise to the misperception of a conflict. This is a strange viewpoint from a self-proclaimed Marxist who is evidently concerned with 'false consciousness' and berates social psychology for promoting a false consciousness regarding conflict. Or, perhaps, Plon believes that we know all we need to know about how people may sometimes misconstrue their real interests. In my own view, this is one of the many gaps in marxist theory which can be filled by social-psychological theory and research.

As 'an essential point' in his critique, Plon stresses that social psychology claims that the psychological level is endowed not only with an absolute autonomy but also that it is the foundation of all analyses of social reality. He provides no evidence to support his assertion, and, on the face of it, the contrary assertion seems more valid. American social psychology has largely pictured psychological processes as being nothing but reflections of social reality. Hence, it is more appropriately criticized for viewing man as a passive, inert object whose psychological processes are molded by and directly reflect the groups and other social realities in which he is involved. As Chein (1963) and Moscovici (1973) have pointed out, the bias in social psychology has been to consider how man has been molded by his social environment rather than how man can mold and change his social world. I do not deny that some social psychologists (e.g., Homans) try to explain social reality in terms of psychological processes, but in general social psychologists, in contrast to such anthropologists as Lévi-Strauss, have paid little attention to how the unique bio-socio-psychological properties of human beings influence the social processes in which they are involved. In my own view, the distinctive domain of social psychology as a discipline lies in the study of the interplay between psychological and social processes, and it is a mistake to see the interrelation as being reducible to a unidirectional causal arrow. The conception of psychological processes as nothing but reflections of social processes and the view of social processes as being nothing but summated individual psychological processes are both wrong: Plon appears to want to substitute the former for the latter error.
Interpersonal relations as the essence of society

Plon would be quite right if he asserted that some social psychologists view interpersonal relations (or, more aptly, 'small groups') as the essence of society and that international relations are essentially interpersonal relations. I will not defend this approach since, despite Plon's assertion, I and also many other social psychologists (see Kelman, 1965) do not agree with it. But it is a distortion of this viewpoint to represent it as 'apolitical'; political processes are seen to take place through a network of interpersonal relations and interpersonal relations are, themselves, viewed in political terms — i.e., as being concerned with issues relating to conflict of interests, exploitation, power, strategies of influence, coalition formation and so forth.

My own viewpoint is not what Plon presents it to be; it is rather more grandiose than Plon suggests. I propose that it is heuristically useful to apply similar concepts and laws to different types of social units. International relations are not interpersonal relations; the types of social units involved in international and interpersonal relations are clearly different, as are their components. Nevertheless, I suggest that it may be possible, for example, to learn much that has relevance to understanding cooperative and competitive processes in international relations by studying such processes in interpersonal relations. In a completely parallel way, one might develop much insight into aspects of interpersonal relations by conceiving of them in terms that have been developed in the study of international relations. My recent book, The resolution of conflict: Constructive and destructive processes, considers this approach in greater detail.

Here, I simply wish to point out that Plon misconstrues the issues. It is incorrect to say that history, economics and politics do not concern this approach to conflict. At each level, there is an inevitable concern with these matters. Although there may be conceptual similarities across levels, 'history', 'economics' and 'politics' are represented in different types of events at each level. The type of events one needs to identify and characterize are different when one is concerned with the 'history, economics and politics' of conflict at the interpersonal level as compared with conflict at the intergroup or international levels.

By some peculiar reasoning, Plon has appeared to arrive at the odd conclusion that the only conflict that should be of interest to social psychologists are class conflicts, that there is nothing of interest in the study of interpersonal conflict. My own view is that interpersonal conflicts have intrinsic merit as objects of study in themselves, and such conflict is the area in which social psychologists have uniquely appropriate methodological skills. Few psychologists, including myself, claim to be competent authorities on international conflict; instead, what some of us have claimed is that the concepts and propositions emerging from the social-psychological study of conflict may have relevance to understanding international conflict (and vice versa).

Plon perpetuates a confusion of Jones and Gerard when he characterizes laboratory studies of conflict as meant to be 'miniatured models' or simulations of international conflict or other naturally occurring conflicts. The laboratory conflicts are in no respect simulations or miniaturizations; the only relevance they have to naturally occurring conflicts — whether such conflicts be at the interpersonal, intergroup or international levels — is through the possibility of applying a similar conceptual analysis to the laboratory and non-laboratory conflicts. The understanding of any specific conflict obviously requires more than knowledge of relevant concepts and propositions; it also entails knowledge of how these concepts and propositions are embodied in the specific historical, economic and political events occurring in the given conflict. On this latter point, I agree with Plon although our interpretation of the nature of these events in a specific conflict could very well differ. For example, in characterizing class struggle, he appears to disregard entirely the relevance of competence (i.e., how to apply one's power effectively to attain one's objectives) as though blunders are somehow excluded from this area of life.

War should be analyzed only in the abstract

I do not speak for others but it is certainly my position that war should be analyzed in the abstract as well as in reference to the specific political-economic-historical context which is associated with a specific war. There is much to be learned from studies such as those of Richardson or of Wright which have examined wars throughout history in an attempt to identify statistical regularities associated with the outbreak of war. This is not to deny the importance of studying, additionally, the total contexts of specific wars. When social psychologists such as myself have made statements about specific wars such as the one in Vietnam, it has been done after some analysis of its total context. I do not agree with Clausewitz that 'war is nothing but the continuation of politics on another terrain' (my italics). This statement lost substantial merit with the onset of World War I and lost whatever merit it had originally with the development of hydrogen bombs. I would have supposed that Plon as a Marxist might be cognizant of the possibility that quantitative changes in the destructiveness of warfare might produce qualitative leaps in its nature.
**Violence, war and revolution are absolute evils**

By a strange contortion of logic, Plon concludes from the fact that social psychologists are concerned about the destructiveness of violence and war that they are pacifists and hence also opponents of revolution. (What this ‘sacred’ word means to Plon is not specified despite his attempt to sanctify his argument by implicit appeal to its sanctifying value.) Plon’s peculiar logic seems to suggest that he believes that there is some intrinsic merit in violence, that a revolution would not truly be a revolution unless it were consecrated in violence: This is a romanticizing of violence as the mechanism of social change.

My personal view on these issues is straightforward. Violence is often used to establish or preserve an unjust status quo. The right to self-defense against such violence is an inalienable right for every individual, group or nation. In concordance with this view, I fought the Nazis in World War II. In so doing, I did not glorify violence but reluctantly accepted it as the lesser of evils. Having accepted violence as the lesser of evils in World War II, I and many other social scientists who participated in it have not unnaturally been concerned with whether we could contribute to the development of knowledge which might reduce the necessity for violence even as the lesser of evils. Moreover, some of us believe that the quantitative change in violence that would be involved in a nuclear war would make such a war an ‘absolute evil’.

**‘Economics’, ‘politics’ and ‘power’**

I do not wish to get into a disputation with Plon about the meaning of the Marxist texts. However, I do wish to suggest that many Marxist scholars would agree with my emphasis on the central role of ‘power’ even when considering the ‘sum total of the relations of production which are postulated to constitute the economic structure of society’. Marx’s political-economic theory was, after all, a theory of the social relations of production, and the key roles in these relations — such as ‘owner of capital’ and ‘wage-laborer’ — are roles which differ enormously in power. Modern Marxists, moreover, would stress that ‘control’ rather than ‘ownership’ of capital is what is crucial; in other words, it is power rather than wealth that is important in the social relations of production. Wealth is obviously an important determinant of power but by no means the only one. I stress this point because Plon’s narrow ‘economic’ definition of the relations of production, as I have suggested earlier, might lead readily to a basic misconception, namely, that the change from private to collective ownership of the means of production, without corresponding changes to its collective (i.e., democratic) control, is necessarily a progressive move toward socialism. Stalinism will stand forever as a symbol of this misconception. While the issue of ownership is not unimportant, the key issues center about who are able to participate in the decisions affecting both production and distribution and in whose interests such decisions are made. The essence of ‘politics’ is concentrated on these issues of control over economic organization, policy and practices; politics obviously has many forms in addition to those of voting in elections of government officials.

Plon apparently thinks that this viewpoint isolates the political process from the economic structure and that it implies keeping the ‘capitalist economics system in place’. His reasoning here eludes me. I see ‘politics’ and ‘economics’ as intertwined so that almost every political action has economic consequences and vice versa and that a redistribution of power would almost certainly not keep the capitalist system in place. However, Plon is correct in asserting that I consider what he terms ‘superstructure’ (ideology, the nature of the State, legal and political processes, military organization, etc.) not to be exclusively determined by the economic organization of society. It seems to me that the entire body of scholarly work in the social sciences, even the work done under the stimulation and within the framework of Marxist thinking, indicates that the causal processes linking economic structure, ideology, political processes, military organization, etc., are too complex to be subsumed under the causal model of a unidirectional arrow from economic structure to ‘superstructures’. For example, Ossowski (1963), the Polish sociologist, has observed that in modern industrial societies the political authorities increasingly determine the system of social stratification rather than being determined by it. This is not to deny the important role of economic organization; it is rather to assert that it has no exclusive role in determining social events and that the extent of its causal role is not independent of historical realities. The recognition that social consciousness (i.e., superstructure) can play a role in influencing the relations of production was always implicit in Marxian thinking. Was it not, after all, Karl Marx in the Communist manifesto who called upon workers to change their consciousness of themselves and of their relations to one another in order to transform society? Does not Marx’s appeal to the workers of the world to unite and lose their chains suggest that Marx was right to state ‘I am not a Marxist’ in response to the vulgarization of his ideas by some Marxists?
The Prisoner’s Dilemma Game ¹

Plon’s discussion of the Prisoner’s Dilemma Game (PDG) strangely misses the entire point of the PDG. The crucial dilemma posed by the PDG is not the dilemma for prisoners but the one it poses for a traditional, ideological rationalization of capitalist society; namely, that individual and social welfare will be enhanced if all individuals in society rationally pursue their own narrow self-interests without regard to the welfare of others. The PDG demonstrates that this rationalization is false: When individuals follow the prescribed course of the ‘rational’ pursuit of self-interest (by trying to maximize their own gains or minimize their own losses) they end up with outcomes that are neither individually nor collectively rational (i.e., they lose individually and collectively when they could be gaining). To put it another way, the PDG makes it clear that the pursuit of narrow self-interest is not rational whenever there is some objective cooperative interest relating the various individuals together (as in ‘non-zero sum games’ or ‘mixed motive situations’) even though it may be individually ‘rational’ in purely competitive situations (as in ‘zero-sum games’) such as wars or competition. To express it still another way, the PDG demonstrates that the vulgarized social Darwinism which rationalizes capitalism in terms of the competitive survival of the fittest has self-defeating consequences when applied to situations that are not purely competitive. As George Lakás points out in his History and class consciousness, the capitalist economy, by its own proud admission, has no conscious directing principle. Rather, it puts its trust in the invisible hand of the market which is supposed to vector all private greed into a common good. The PDG reveals the intellectual hollowness of this view of society.

¹ At various points in his paper, Plon makes several references to Lewin and game theory and to myself as developing Lewin’s ideas in this respect. Let me set the record straight on this matter. Lewin’s work and thought were not influenced by game theory. Von Neumann and Morgenstern’s classic book was published in 1944 and Lewin died in early 1947. In a paper on quasi-stationary equilibrium published in 1947, Lewin refers to the Von Neumann and Morgenstern book, in passing, in the context of a brief discussion of how mathematical economics has developed powerful analytic tools for treating some basic aspects of group life. In this paper, which so far as I know is Lewin’s only reference to the work of Von Neumann and Morgenstern, game theory is not as much discussed. Nor did Lewin, to my knowledge, ever discuss game theory in any of the many seminars of his which I attended. My own work, using the Prisoner’s Dilemma Game, had nothing to do with Lewin (if Lewin had an interest in game theory, I knew nothing of it) nor with Schelling. I had worked with the PDG for over five years before I heard of Schelling. I was introduced to the PDG by Howard Raiffa in the early 1950s, and it seemed to me that it provided an unusually interesting way of studying, experimentally, factors that could affect the development of a cooperative relationship.

Plon not only misses the basic point about the PDG (and also the basic difference in the applicability of ‘game theory’ to ‘zero sum’ and ‘non-zero sum’ games), but he also confuses the issues. Of course, as Plon asserts, the social psychologist who uses the PDG in an experiment is creating the conflict for the subjects, and, of course, the conflict is created in such a way as to make it difficult for the subjects to be trusting and trustworthy in relation to one another. It is precisely because the PDG enables the study of the determinants of trust and suspicion in a carefully controlled situation that it is of scientific interest to the thoughtful social psychologist. Since Plon apparently recognizes that one of the features of capitalist society is the division of society into atomized, isolated, competing individuals and groups who are mutually suspicious and alienated, it is only by the most strained logic that he can condemn social psychologists for using the PDG in order to understand, at a theoretical level, some of the conditions which enable people to overcome these tendencies to divisiveness which impede the development of productive cooperative relations. I do not deny that much of the experimental work in social psychology is mindless, but my introduction of the PDG into social psychology was specifically directed at the issues of trust and suspicion and how to overcome the barriers to cooperation induced by a situation conducive to suspicion, divisiveness and competition. These issues should be of concern to all social scientists and particularly those with a marxist orientation. I suspect that, paradoxically, it is Plon’s preoccupation with being a Marxist which blinds him to the relevance of the PDG to marxist concerns.

In Plon’s ‘theoretical analysis of the obstacle’, he describes the objective of game theory incorrectly. The emphasis in game theory is precisely the opposite of Plon’s characterization. Game theorists posit that, in a purely competitive situation, it is wise to assume that you will not be able to predict accurately what the other will do and, hence, it is prudent to act under the assumption that you have to defend yourself against the most intelligent or effective actions of your opponent. Game theorists reduce the other to oneself only in the limited sense that the other is assumed to be as competitive and intelligent as oneself; there is no attempt to ‘identify’ with the other so as to make individualized predictions about the other. Game theory, in fact, provides a theoretical rationale for avoiding the infinite regress of particularized expectations with which Plon mistakenly belabors game theory.

Plon also misrepresents my view: In his terminology, his misrepresentation is an imaginary fiction of the object he claims to study based upon his inability to differentiate his own subjectivity, with its own imaginary conceptions, from the objective reality of my position. (Plon invokes the prestige of Lacan to rationalize a not-too-subtle form of labeling the views which he is attacking as ‘egocentric
thinking', in Piaget's sense. Lacan's analysis does not deserve to be debased this way.) My position is that the people involved in situations which have basic properties similar to those of the PDG can only find a productive solution by transforming such situations into new situations characterized by cooperative interrelatedness. Only by such a transformation will the dilemmas arising from atomization, mutual suspicion and competition be ended. The actions initiating the transformation may come from outside such situations as when the experimenter 'manipulates' variables to induce a cooperative orientation in the PDG or from within it. The ability to take the goals of others as goals of one's own (i.e., to love) and the ability to take the role of the other, without reducing the other to oneself or oneself to the other, are valuable assets in the attempt to transform a suspicion-inducing, divisive situation into a cooperative one. Since these abilities are usually not highly developed in most people, it is fortunate that they are not necessary conditions for the development of cooperation even though they are enormously facilitative of it.

**My approach**

I am pleased that Plon has honored my work by his extensive critique even though I consider his characterization of it to be more of a caricature than an accurate portrait. My work on conflict is presented in detail in my recent book, *The resolution of conflict: Constructive and destructive processes*. I refer the reader to it to form his own impressions of its nature. Here, I wish to emphasize that my approach has been consistently social psychological and that my research has largely been confined to the individual, interpersonal and small-group levels. Grandiose as my approach may be, I do not deny the importance of other perspectives than the social psychological or the necessity of studying conflict beyond the small-group level. However, I do consider that the social-psychological perspective is relevant to all levels of social analysis from the intrapsychic to the international. Even if this view turns out to be false, the study of conflict at the individual, interpersonal and group levels has intrinsic merit in itself.

Elsewhere (Deutsch, 1973), I have indicated that the key notions in a social-psychological approach are:

1. Each participant in a social interaction responds to the other in terms of his perceptions and cognitions of the other; these may or may not correspond to the other's actualities.

2. Each participant in a social interaction, being cognizant of the other’s capacity for awareness, is influenced by his own expectations concerning the other's actions as well as by his perceptions of the other's conduct. These expectations may or may not be accurate; the ability to take the role of the other and to predict the other's behavior is not notable in either interpersonal or international crises.

3. Social interaction is not only initiated by motives but also generates new motives and alters old ones. It is not only determined but also determining. In the process of rationalizing and justifying actions that have been taken and effects that have been produced, new values and motives emerge. Moreover, social interaction exposes one to models and exemplars which may be identified with and imitated. Thus, a child's personality is shaped largely by the interactions he has with his parents and peers and by the people with whom he identifies. Similarly, a nation's institutions may be considerably influenced by its interrelations with other nations and by the existing models of functioning that other nations provide.

4. Social interaction takes place in a social environment - in a family, a group, a community, a nation, a civilization - that has developed informal systems, symbols, categories, rules and values that are relevant to human interactions. Hence, to understand the events that occur in social interactions one must comprehend the interplay of these events with the broader social context in which they occur.

5. Even though each participant in a social interaction, whether an individual or a group, is a complex unit composed of many interacting sub-systems, it can act in a unified way toward some aspect of its environment. Decision making within the individual as within the nation can entail a struggle among different interests and values for control over action. Internal structure and internal processes, while less observable in individuals than in groups, are characteristic of all social units.

The social-psychological perspective on conflict highlights the possibility of discrepancy between the objective and the perceived state of affairs. Recognition of this possibility suggests a typology of conflicts (Deutsch, 1973, Ch. 1) which emphasizes the relationship between the two. Such an emphasis leads to specification of the types of distortion which can occur, including the non-recognition of real conflicts of interests as well as their displacement and misattribution. This emphasis in turn leads to a consideration of what activates the sense of injustice and what turns a latent into a veridical conflict (Deutsch, 1974). This focus also suggests examination of the social and psychological determinants of the readiness to cope with real conflicts in an undistorted way. The study of the power, internal cohesion and structure of the parties as they affect and are affected by the course of conflict between them are inherent concerns in this perspective.

My approach to conflict has not only been influenced by the social-psychological perspective, it also has been directed by a central question: What determines
whether a conflict will take a constructive or destructive course? At the extremes, these terms are easy to define. Thus a conflict clearly has destructive consequences if its participants are dissatisfied with the outcomes and feel they have lost as a result of the conflict. Similarly, a conflict has productive consequences if the participants all are satisfied with their outcomes and feel that they have gained as a result of the conflict. Also, in most instances, a conflict in which the outcomes are satisfying to all the participants will be more constructive than one that is satisfying to some and dissatisfying to others.

It is, of course, easier to identify and measure satisfactions-dissatisfactions and gains-losses in simple laboratory conflict-situations than it is in the complex conflicts of groups in everyday life. Yet even in these complex situations, it is not impossible to compare conflicts in terms of their outcomes. In some instances, union-management negotiations may lead to a prolonged strike with considerable loss and ill will resulting to both parties; in other instances, such negotiations may lead to a mutually satisfying agreement from which both sides obtain something they want. In some cases, a quarrel between a husband and wife will clear up unexpressed misunderstandings and lead to greater intimacy; in others, it may produce only bitterness and estrangement.

The point is not how to eliminate or prevent conflict but rather how to make it productive. I am not concerned with situations of ‘pure’ conflict in which one side inevitably loses what the other gains. My interest is in conflict where there is a mixture of cooperative and competitive interests, where a variety of outcomes is possible – mutual loss, gain for one and loss for the other, and mutual gain. Thus, my approach can be restated as an investigation of the conditions under which the participants will evolve a cooperative or a competitive relationship in a situation which permits either.

It should be stressed that the elimination of pure conflict is not very restricting. Conflict is determined by what is valued by the conflicting parties and by what beliefs and perceptions those parties hold. But values, beliefs and perceptions are not always unalterable. In addition, there are few circumstances, particularly if the situation is repetitive or if the participants are involved in many different relationships together, that are so rigidly structured as to cause one’s gains to come inevitably from the other’s losses. It is, of course, true that the participants may, allsightedly define an occasion that permits mutual gain as a situation of pure conflict and respond to one another in a purely competitive manner.

There is an important advantage to be gained from the reformulation of the original query into a statement concerning the conditions under which a cooperative or competitive relationship will evolve among participants who have a mixture of cooperative and competitive interests in regard to one another. It permits the application of considerable previous theoretical and research work to the characterization of two major processes of interrelationship in dealing with conflict: A cooperative process and a competitive one. It may be assumed that the development of one or the other type of relationship will be manifest not only in the outcomes of conflict but also in the processes of dealing with it. Thus, the focus of my work has been on investigation of the conditions under which the parties in a conflict will evolve a cooperative or competitive process in relation to the conflict confronting them. Much of my research and its theoretical as well as practical implications are summarized in my recent book. The work is far from complete. Yet, I believe it has something useful to say to those who are seeking to promote constructive rather than destructive social conflict.

Concluding comment

Plon has presented a critique of the social psychology of conflict which has as its thesis that work in this area marks the existence of real class conflict and thus (if it has any influence) serves to inhibit the possibly violent class struggle which may be necessary in the revolutionary seizing of state power by the oppressed classes. In my rejoinder, I have attempted to indicate how Plon has misconstrued the work in this area and how such work has relevance to the intellectual concerns of those concerned with bringing about social change.

Plon’s paper raises important issues which, unfortunately, are obscured in the fog of his polemics and misrepresentations. As I see it, some of the basic issues are: (1) Can there be a meaningful, theoretical social psychology without an adequate theory of society? Plon would presumably answer ‘no’, while I would say ‘yes’, but the applications of social psychology require such a theory. (2) Is there available such a theory of society? Plon would presumably say that Marxism is such a theory, while I would say that it may be the best one that is available but that it is far from adequate in relation to large-scale social processes and almost completely vacuous in relation to small-scale social processes. (3) How does one’s theory of society affect one’s approach to social psychology? Plon would presumably say that if you don’t have the right theory you contribute to ‘false consciousness’ and to the maintenance of the status quo, and I would suggest that Freud’s contribution to social psychology is notable even though he was not a Marxist.

These questions merit a fuller discussion than Plon’s paper or my preceding comments give to them. Perhaps, this Journal would sponsor a discussion of these questions in a future issue.
REFERENCES


Lukács, G. (1923), History and class consciousness: Studies of the Marxist dialectic. Berlin, Malitz.


Résumé

Cet article est une réponse à la critique de Plon de la psychologie sociale du conflit publiée dans ce journal. La réponse passe en revue l'histoire de la psychologie sociale américaine, la signification de la 'résolution de conflit', la nature du dilemme du déterminisme, et passe brièvement en revue le rôle du pouvoir dans la politique. Les caractéristiques de l'approche de la notion de conflit en psychologie sociale du présent auteur sont ébauchées, et il est suggéré qu'une telle approche a une pertinence directe quant aux préoccupations intellectuelles de ceux qui cherchent à amener le changement social.

Zusammenfassung