CHAPTER 15

Social Conflict Theories of the Family

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Introduction

Almost 15 years ago, the senior author of this chapter and another sociologist, Joyce Elliott Foss, presented a paper entitled, "In Search of the 'Missing' Conceptual Framework in Family Sociology: The Social Conflict Framework," at the annual meetings of the National Council on Family Relations (Farrington and Foss, 1977). The central thesis of this paper was that it was finally time to "officially discover" the social conflict approach to the study of the family—an approach that seemed to us to be very much implicit within and relevant to the field of family studies. It was our sense that all of the necessary ingredients for such an approach were present and that most of the really difficult work of laying out the parameters of the successful application of principles and concepts of a social conflict perspective on social reality to the study of the family had already been accomplished. All that was really left to do, in our opinion, was to formally recognize the value and the legitimacy of this approach—as had been done systematically with a variety of other theoretical approaches in previous works (Christensen, 1964; Hill and Hansen, 1960; Nye and Berardo, 1966)—and to put it in its rightful place as one of the most important and useful of the theoretical perspectives available to students of the family.

In looking back over what has happened within the field of family studies since that time, however, it is not altogether clear that the promise that we saw for the social conflict approach to the study of the family has been realized. In fact, at a number of key points during the past several decades, the social conflict perspective has been described (and generally dismissed) as "prominent in some circles" (italics ours), "a minor theoretical approach," and "not very important in the study of the family," by family experts engaged in surveying important theoretical developments within their discipline (Broderick, 1971; Holman and Burr, 1980; Thomas and Wilcox, 1987, respectively). Clearly, if these scholars have been correct in their reading of the field, there is good reason to question whether the social conflict approach to the study of the family—while no longer "missing," perhaps—has ever really fulfilled what once appeared to us to be its considerable potential.

We seek to answer that question in this chapter, and we will work toward this objective in the
following fashion. First, we will discuss the development of a "social conflict approach to the study of the family," focusing in particular on the peculiar obstacles that the social conflict perspective faced in successfully "breaking into" the field of family studies and the difficulties that it experienced in gaining genuine and lasting acceptance among mainstream family scholars. We will concede that we have, in all likelihood, been witnessing a gradual decline in the utilization of this perspective in recent years (at least, as a major vehicle for theorization about and research on the family); however, we will explain this occurrence as the combined result of (1) the unusually eclectic internal nature of the family conflict perspective, which developed during the late 1960s and 1970s, coupled with (2) the gradual emergence of several other theoretical perspectives within the field of family studies, which share much in common substantively with the social conflict approach but are more appealing to various constituents on ideological grounds. Finally, we will conclude by arguing that, whatever its future may be as an important approach to the study of the family, social conflict theory has made a significant and lasting set of contributions to the field of family studies—contributions that would not have been possible if it were not for the successful emergence of a viable "family conflict perspective" during the past 20 years.

Before we move on to an evaluation of the place that social conflict theory occupies within the field of family studies, however, it is important that our readers share with us a rudimentary understanding of where this approach to the study of social reality has come from historically. With this in mind, we turn now to a brief consideration of several of the most important substantive roots of the social conflict perspective.

The Historical Origins of a Social Conflict Theory of the Family

If we were to systematically look at the thoughts and writings of those who are commonly regarded as the most outstanding contributors to human intellectual history, we would find that virtually all of these individuals have had something to say about the phenomenon of "social conflict" (a fact that seemingly says something about the absolutely fundamental nature of this aspect of human social existence). For this reason, there is necessarily a certain amount of frustration inherent within any attempt to provide a relatively meaningful, yet concise, summary of the diverse body of thought generally referred to as "social conflict theory."

Our way of responding to this frustration in this particular essay has been to limit our discussion of the historical roots of social conflict theory to several basic themes that we believe to be absolutely critical to a social conflict conception of the family.1 These themes are the following: (1) the tendency toward conflict as a basic element of human nature; (2) conflict, competition, and the struggle for scarce resources; (3) the Marxian theory of conflict as a basic structural condition of society; (4) Freud's psychoanalytic model of intrapsychic conflict; (5) Weber's speculation on the nature of the relationship(s) between conflict and power, and (6) the possible integrative social functions that conflict provides for the larger social order.

Conflict and Human Nature

We begin this brief history with Niccolo Machiavelli (1469–1527), who, in the course of his career, wrote two works, The Discourses (1531/1948) and The Prince (1532/1948), expressing his views on conflict and statecraft, and with Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), who, over a century later, published Leviathan (1651/1947), also concerned with statecraft. Central to the views of both of these men was a belief in a distinctive conception of human nature and its importance to an understanding of the state. Both saw the basic character of human nature as producing a continuous condition of conflict among men (and women), since all individual actors exhibit pure self-interest, unless controlled by the state.