INTRODUCTION

"How can polarized social conflict involving risk be reduced and replaced by an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect among the opposing parties? What research is needed to design an environment in which effective multiway communication, constructive debate, and compromise can take place?" (1)

This quote taken from a list of 10 relevant research questions in the field of risk and technology assessment refers to one of the most promising and demanded, but at the same time most ambitious tasks of social science research: the promotion of social integration. This task is based on the assumption that science could not only provide data for clarifying relationships between given phenomena, but could also offer procedural advice on how to accomplish means of conflict resolution. But can science, and in particular social science, contribute to conflict management? Is science the appropriate instrument for interfering with political debate and facilitating the formation of compromises? Is the role of science overstressed by aiming toward a mediating function between social interest groups?

Most sub-systems of society perceive themselves as central agents for the well-functioning of society in general. They consider their contribution an essential effort to support the present coherence of social forces and a decisive means for shaping the future performance of society. The sub-system of science might also overstate its social influence by demanding a superior position as an arbiter in social conflict.

What kind of services can science offer to the policymaker in order to facilitate conflict resolution? There are basically
four possible contributions of utilizing scientific expertise for political consulting. 1) Discussion of false inferences: Using the methods of scientific inquiry it is possible, at least in principle, to investigate the likelihood of various consequences of proposed policy actions and to exclude statements which can be proven wrong; 2) Modeling of causal structures: Since reality is characterized by a high degree of complexity, any policymaker is unable to overlook the consequences of his political action. With the aid of an abstract model, scientists can create a simplified picture of causal interdependencies and provide some insights into the probable consequences of policy options; 3) Forecasting of future developments and consequences: In addition to causal relationships between policy actions and social consequences, scientists can describe the direction and probability of technological and social change by combining data from past experiences and revealing general trends of social and economic development. They might also provide information by which politically desirable states of society can be achieved; and, 4) Providing arenas for conflict resolution: Scientists can propose procedures and formal methods for facilitating conflict management. The process of decisionmaking can be designed in such a way that the affected interest groups perceive a fair chance to participate in the final decisionmaking process and the general public can gain the feeling that their concerns have been taken seriously. Such a mediating role of science can only be accomplished if the arena is being shaped by scientists without interfering in the arbitration process by means of their own values and preferences (2).

These four principal contributions of science to policymaking have been challenged by the actual performance of scientific expertise in the political arena. First, experts themselves are bound into the network of social interests and often act as advocates of policies or ideologies. Second, the separation between values and facts which underly the cooperative function of policymakers and scientists is rather artificial and dubious. As a result, either the scientists come up with only those facts that support their own preferences (technocratic planning) or the politicians use factual expertise merely as a justification of preformulated political decisions. Third, interest groups are more interested in scientists as advocates (of their own case) and less interested in scientists as mediators. By utilizing scientific expertise to legitimize one's own claims, it is more probable to gain a higher proportion of social influence at the end. It can also be expected that one-sided scientific support reinforces the motivation and mobilization of all group members (a vital interest for survival, if the interest group is not yet institutionalized). Only when groups involved in the conflict