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Abstract

It is a truism that human relations as well as relations between various parts of society always has been and is as much characterized by contradictions, dissensus and conflicts as by cooperation and consensus. Accordingly the issue of conflict have been important in philosophy since antiquity and the medieval times and in the social sciences since the beginning of modern society. In the short perspective, during the last part of the 20th century, at least violent conflicts became relatively more and more rare (not to forget e.g. the genocide in Rwanda or the Balkan war) and conflicts in politics, at least in “the old” industrial states, seemed scarce and parliamentary negotiable. In about the last decade, however, we have observed a growing amount of devastating conflicts that in particular affect certain ethnic groups or whole populations in several parts of the global society but also rapidly growing political conflicts, including terrorism, in most parts of the world.

The issue in this paper is how to manage conflicts in the “multicultural” society. Firstly sociological conflict theory versus conflict in Luhmann’s systems theoretical view is reviewed. Systems theory is, as is well known, not a consensus theory. Neither, however, it is a conflict theory. Conflict is in short an outcome of communications, which end with a “No” and which may be problematic, or not. In the second part of the paper I show that according to systems theory differentiation is the primary means to manage conflict. In the third part of the paper the issue of conflict in organizations and the managing of such conflicts in particular in culturally diverse teams is dealt with. According to a widespread idea in the theory of organizational culture shared values has to be focused upon in organizations not only to avoid conflicts but more over to make the company or the public organization work efficient. The meaning of “dominant value orientations” (Schein) is, however, ambiguous. Actual research has shown that teams consisting of staff with culturally diverse background may function as well efficient and without conflicts. To define organizational culture as a set of basic assumptions (Schein), in the sense of semantic basic concepts (Koselleck; Luhmann), means that shared values may be delimited to certain narrow themes in the context of the organizational communication.

Thus, differentiation, as to grounds and themes, norms and values, role positions and so on, are keys in conflict management. It is proposed that if a decrease of conflicts in society as a whole is wanted, culture should then generally be defined and argued in favour of in the same way to open for increased contingency in communication, chiefly as to conflicting themes.