TOWARD THE APPLICATION OF CONFLICT THEORY
TO THE ANALYSIS OF FACULTY - ADMINISTRATION RELATIONS
IN THE UNIVERSITY

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Traditional views of the university and conventional definitions of conflict have operated to make the university seem an unlikely setting for the study of conflict. One observer of the university as a social organization has remarked:

> Traditionally, we think of the university as a sequestered cloister, an ivory tower, remote from hustle and bustle, turbulent cross pressures, conflicting interests and a sense of urgency. From this view of the university grows our traditional concept of total laissez-faire that we refer to as academic freedom.[1]

It is true that the increasing salience of the university in this country, brought about by student riots, teacher strikes and less dramatic but possibly more important factors, such as burgeoning enrollments, has served to dispel the more idyllic conceptions of higher education. But there has been no attempt on the part of educators or social scientists to analyze in a systematic fashion the phenomenon of intra-organizational conflict in the university. Indeed, some writers have attempted to gloss over the presence or possibility of such relations in universities. Woodburne, e.g., commenting upon the nature of faculty-administrator relationships, has said:

> There is, in reality, no divergence of their proper interests. In most instances where differences have developed, they have resulted from a misconception of either the faculty or the administrative function, or from tactlessness or vanity...This writer would go further and maintain that to admit the inevitability of conflict between faculty and administration is shortsighted and likely to breed contention where none existed before.[2]

An earlier writer has expressed a similar sentiment in regard to the relationship between governing boards and faculties: "There is no natural antagonism between trustees and professors. To suggest it is to suggest failure in their proper relation to one another; to suppose it is to provoke failure; to assume it is to insure failure."[3]

This is not to suggest, of course, that no one has recognized the presence of internal conflict and dissensus in universities or that it has been totally ignored by commentators upon and analysts of the university. Most writers who attempt to describe the university take into account the differentiation of its organization into the component parts of governing

board, administration, faculty and students. And in most cases some attention is given to the fact that the differentiated parts do not always co-exist in complete harmony. But the source and nature of the disharmony, and its effect upon the structure of the university, are rarely examined.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is to examine, in a preliminary fashion, the utility of conflict theory for the study of change in the university. The purpose is subject, because of the limitations imposed by the scope of the paper, to some immediate qualifications.

First, significant differences in structure between American universities and those in Europe and Latin America make the observations in the paper relevant only to the American scene. A second proscription, made necessary by considerations of length, will limit the discussion to only two parts of the university - the faculty and the administration. The choice of these two parties is partly arbitrary and partly based on the grounds that these bodies are more intimately and continuously involved in the dynamics of university government than are the students or the governing board. Third, the diversity of structure and operation among American universities means that it will be possible to find specific cases which will run counter to the generalizations drawn. And finally, the fact that there is no stable or widely accepted theory of social conflict makes a clear cut presentation difficult.

In the light of the final point, the question could be raised as to whether the present state of conflict theory justifies an attempt to base any kind of analysis upon it. My answer is that I feel, along with a growing number of sociologists,[4] that sociology has for too long been preoccupied with a too-exclusive emphasis upon order and social statics to the disregard of considerations of change and social dynamics. While this paper is not an attempt to develop a theory of conflict, it is an heuristic attempt to show the relevance of the idea of conflict, not simply for the explanation of sporadic and so-called pathological disturbances in a social system, but for elucidating a constant and elemental feature of social life. This attempt could perhaps be regarded as "semi-empirical." For while I do not have empirical data from specific institutions of higher learning, I am dealing with a part of the real world and I am employing common knowledge about the history and organization of universities.

THE BACKGROUND FOR CONFLICT

Although, as stated above, this is not a discussion of conflict per se, it is based on certain theoretical assumptions regarding the nature of conflict and its relevance for the study of social organizations. It may be helpful to state in a summary fashion some of the elements of conflict and change which underlie the theoretical posture adopted in the discussion. They are as follows:[5]

1. In any social system there are persistent strains which generate social conflict.

2. Social order consists of those mechanisms or institutions which control or direct the conflict produced by persistent social strain. Thus conflict and associated change and order are concurrent features of a social organization or a society.

3. One of the most common types or kinds of strain is connected with the exercise of authority. That is, social organizations may be viewed from the point of view of their structures of coercion and constraint. Because social organizations are structures of constraint and coercion, they generate conflicts of interest and become the birthplace of conflict groups.[6]

4. Institutional arrangements within a given organization are invariably related to and affected by corresponding institutional arrangements of the environing society.

5. Changes in the environing society which impinge upon a given organization may be either conflict reducing or conflict producing. New social norms which arise as a result of change may be in conflict with some existing norms and adversely affect existing interest, and the same change may complement and reinforce other existing norms and interests.

In the light of this theoretical stance, the thesis which I wish to develop in the remainder of the paper is that conflict between faculties and administrations in American universities may be most fruitfully viewed as resulting from the juxtaposition of two analytically distinct social systems within the same social organization. Crucial to this view is the fact that at one point in the history of the development of American universities both of these systems were combined in one status position, namely, that of the professor, and that the occupant of that position was obviously dominant in the control of the university. The introduction of a second status position, that of the administrator, upset the "balance of power" in such profound manner that much of what has occurred and is occurring in the contemporary university may be viewed as an attempt to strike a new balance. Conflict, in other words, occurs within a "system of systems," to use Boulding's phrase.[7]

THE TWO SYSTEMS

In his discussion of the evolution of the firm Feldman has observed that:

Most theories of the firm fail to distinguish between the firm as exclusively a membership unit and the firm as the point at which a number of analytical social systems intersect and thus interpenetrate. The member-

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ship unit is one of the intersecting social systems and
is in its own right worthy of investigation. Indeed,
membership systems are precisely the unit of observation
of general administrative theory. However, when the
membership system is the exclusive theoretical concern,
difficulties result from the effort to 'stuff' the almost
infinite variety of concrete phenomena taking place within
the firm into a single analytical social system with a
consistent set of norms...[8]

What Feldman has said about the firm is obviously applicable to the university.
The social boundaries of the university do not end with the membership unit.
There is not a single set of norms which characterizes the university and it
is not possible to speak, in any final manner, of the "goals" of the university.
(A fuller discussion of the lack of specificity of goals in the university
will be found later in the paper.) This indeterminancy has been noted by those
who have attempted to analyze the organizational structure of the university,
especially in regard to the distribution of authority. Corson, e.g., has
commented:

No student of the administration of higher education has
effectively revealed how and why the power is distributed
among trustees, president, deans, department heads and
faculty as it typically is in this country's institutions
of higher learning. Nor has there been an effective assess-
ment of the strengths and weaknesses that accrue from
the distribution of authority that is customary.[9]

In a similar vein Horn has remarked:

There is a twilight zone of authority and responsibility
between the administration and the faculty that few
colleges or universities have worked out satisfactorily.
Given the peculiar nature of academic man and the special
conditions which prevail in the academic community and
inhere in the educational process, this problem may never
be solved.[10]

While I do not believe with Horn that academic man has a "peculiar
nature," or that "special conditions" necessarily prevail in the academic
community, both of the above statements reveal the need for an analysis
of the kind which is here being attempted. The "twilight zone" alluded
to by Horn is, in my estimation, a manifestation of the situation which has
been mentioned above and which will be dealt with more fully later in the
paper.

The question now becomes - what are the social systems relevant to our
present discussion? Broadly speaking, they are the academic or educational
system, represented in the university by the faculty and marked by an
interest in the discovery and transmission of knowledge; and the business or
economic system, represented by the administration and marked by an interest

in the rationally efficient conduct of corporate affairs. Communal and societal status systems are also present and influence the membership in varying amounts.

THE SOURCES OF CONFLICT

When we trace the university back to its origins we find that its initial definition was in terms of a "community of masters and scholars."[11] This was at a time when the concept of education as a separate and distinct institution (a concept which informs our contemporary views of education) was first gaining prominence. During these formative years of the university the position of teacher or "master" combined both of the analytical systems mentioned above. The minimal organizational requirements of the university were discharged by a teacher elected to do so by the faculty, and the self-definition of the incumbents of these administrative positions was still that of a "teacher performing administrative tasks." To a great extent this arrangement still characterizes most modern European universities.

In America, however, for reasons related to environmental developments, not the least of which was the cultural emphasis on "education for all" with an attendant steady increase in the size of universities, a process of fragmentation has taken place. In taking note of this process, Schoenfeld points implicitly to the potential conflict situation which it creates:

> It has been twentieth century America which has contributed
> to higher education its present hierarchy of trustees, presi-
> dents, vice-presidents, comptrollers and deans, much on the
> pattern of American business. Yet in a true American univer-
> sity today the business analogy should not cut too deeply, if
> the "community-of-scholars" concept is to flourish. In a
> business, the experts serve the corporation. In a univer-
> sity, the corporation is there in a sense to serve the
> experts.[12]

The extent to which the corporation does in fact "serve the experts" is a matter to be determined by empirical investigation of particular cases. But it is a fact that in some instances the corporation exists, if not to "serve itself," then at least to extend its authority in the interests of "lifting the university to a position of eminence" or some equally unimpeachable goal. In such enterprises the faculty, individually or collectively, is sometimes seen to be a somewhat bothersome obstacle instead of the cornerstone around which the entire structure is built. This attitude is reflected in this somewhat peevish observation made by a college dean:

> The dean is hardly a free agent in hiring and firing. Aca-
> demic convention dictates otherwise. But his enduring con-
> cern -- even obsession -- must be to attract and keep the
> competent and the talented. His opportunities to do this
> are hedged on all sides....The School of Pharmacy is deter-

mined that the search for a new dean be conducted by them, and the final choice made with the advice and consent of that faculty. Somehow the dean must find ways to break through the entrenched aspirations of the departments.[13]

Implicit in this statement, which is not atypical of administrative viewpoints, is support for the idea that in the university, as in other organizations, there is, as Gouldner has pointed out, a drive for the "functional autonomy" of the parts of the system.[14] While this drive undoubtedly characterizes faculties as well as administrations, it seems logical to assume that the administration "has the edge" in resisting encroachment on its "area of autonomy" because of its proximity to the center of operational affairs and its consequent greater knowledge and control of finances, the smaller size of its membership, and the higher degree of cohesion within administrative circles. This desire for functional autonomy constitutes a basic source of organizational tension and conflict in the university.

TYPES OF CONFLICT IN THE UNIVERSITY

Although functional autonomy is undoubtedly a factor in organizational conflict, the other side of the coin is the pressure of functional interdependence and this factor has important consequences for the nature of conflict within institutions of higher learning. Mack and Snyder, in their review of the literature pertaining to social conflict, have pointed out that:

> The pressures of functional interdependence between parties
> and the need to preserve predictable conflict relations
> result in modes of resolution which stop short of the com-
> plete destruction or crippling of one of the parties. In-
> deed, it is no accident that wars, for example, seem to be
> terminated while there is still an entity for the victor
> to deal with, some minimal organization to make possible a
> new formulation of the now altered power relations.[15]

It is obvious that there is a high degree of functional interdependence between faculty and administration in any university. It is a fact, that one very salient aspect of administrative activity is the garnering of financial support for the institution from a variety of sources. And faculty members are very much aware, by and large, of the direct connection between this activity and their own material welfare. In a current fund raising effort at the University of Kansas, for example, nearly one third of the total amount sought is earmarked for "faculty development."[16] For a faculty to engage in over zealous struggle with an able fund raising administrator would quite literally be to "bite the hand that feeds."

On the other hand, the demands of "good public relations" make it incumbent upon administrators to develop and retain the good will and support of faculty members. Furthermore, the current and perennial shortage of "good" teachers makes it unwise for any administrator to pursue policies

which would be unpopular with a very large segment of the faculty. One
of the most potent weapons possessed by the capable and/or "properly
trained" faculty member is mobility. The implicit threat of withdrawal
of such persons from the conflict situation is, in the university, some-
times more effective than a threat to stay and "slug it out."

Another factor which is at once a source of conflict and an important
determinant of the nature and intensity of conflict in the university is the
degree of goal specificity. Scott has pointed out that:

> ...the goals of most professional organizations, such as medical
> institutions or universities, are lamentably lacking in pre-
> cision. Universities are supposedly geared to the production
> of educated men, but the definitions of precisely what con-
> stitutes an education vary widely both within and outside
> the academic community.[17]

Scott states further that this

> ...lack of specificity of objectives will reverberate through-
> out the structure as disagreements over choosing tasks to be
> performed, personnel to be hired, resources to be allocated,
> members to be compensated and status and authority to be
> distributed.[18]

Two possible solutions for the problems created by lack of goal
specificity are suggested by Scott. One is "the 'strong man' approach in
which one individual or group decrees the organizations' objectives, and
forces conformity in accordance with this definition,..." The other
solution is "...to decentralize the structure as much as possible, allowing
considerable autonomy for individuals and groups to pursue self-defined
objectives."[19]

Whichever of these alternatives is chosen, there is a high probability
that overt expressions of conflict between faculty and administration will
be institutionalized, non-violent, focussed on conflicts of interests rather
than on conflicts of rights and that they will be secondary and mediated rather
than primary and face to face.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AND CONFLICT

Up to this point I have stated that the history of the university
reveals a process of fragmentation whereby two social systems, education
and business, have been separated into two different positions, faculty
member and administrator. The competing norms of these systems tend to
manifest themselves in terms of intra-organizational conflict focussed on
the general question - who is going to run the university? Functional
interdependence of the two parties and a low specificity of organizational
and professional goals are two factors which contribute to making the conflict

non-violent, institutionalized and in general such that it is not usually a matter of public knowledge.

In this final section of the paper the focus will be on types of university structure as conditions which increase or diminish the probability of conflict between faculty and administration forces.

It has sometimes been proposed, in the tradition of Veblen's The Higher Learning in America, that the bureaucratization of the university, brought about by the adoption of the "business outlook," was a convenient method for controlling the faculty from above. On this view the universities of the nation, under the dominating influence of business, have adopted such features as the gradation of staff common in business management, and the techniques of salesmanship and promotion. Furthermore, it is claimed, the status of the professor has been ·reduced to that of a hireling. To Veblen, all of these things were subtle restraints on the exercise of freedom.

But bureaucracy per se is not exclusively an invention or instrument of administrators or governing boards nor is it a sufficient condition for conflict. As Hofstadter and Metzger have pointed out in their discussions of the development of academic freedom, part of the impetus toward bureaucratization arose from the ranks of professors, partly in response to growing competition as the number of university teachers underwent a phenomenal increase around the turn of the century.[20] Moreover, bureaucratization is not necessarily inimical to academic freedom. Rule by bureaucratic directive must be seen in the light of its alternative, which is discretionary choice. Undoubtedly, the establishment of tenure by rank and the fixing of salaries by schedule instead of by individual negotiations has made professors more independent and more willing to take risks.

The point being made is that it is necessary to look beyond bureaucracy as such to various types of bureaucratic organization for structural conditions of conflict. To illustrate this let us examine briefly three typical forms of organizations.

The familiar scalar type, in which the decision making process is centralized and decisions are handed down from above is the most likely to create a potentially explosive situation. Very few universities have this organization in its pure form but it is not unusual to find institutions in which there is no regular channel for the exchange of opinion between faculty and administration and where there is no regular procedure whereby the faculty can participate in the selection of a dean or a departmental chairman, or in the preparation of a budget. In such environments there is little possibility for the development of mechanisms of cooperation. Issues are apt to be dealt with by fiat rather than by discussion. Thus, when an issue which affects a significant portion of the university population is mishandled, there is always the possibility of a "conflagration" which feeds on the accumulated fuel of numerous relatively insignificant but carefully nurtured grievances.

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A second type of bureaucratic structure which has developed in the wake of the proliferation of vice-chancellors, assistant deans and other administrative officers has as its primary feature the fact that subordinate members and organizational units are subject to directives from different and sometimes conflicting offices or groups. Most commentators emphasize the detrimental aspects of this "multiple subordination" for the morale and performance of lower level participants. Hamilton, however, in her discussion of hospital administration, has suggested the possibility that "...the split in authority works to the benefit of the patients since it sets up a series of checks and balances."[21]

Although the proposition has not been subjected to empirical testing, it is probably true in the university as well. A departmental chairman, for example, who must get approval for certain features of his undergraduate program from the dean of the college, for other features from the vice-president in charge of finances, and for still others from the dean of the graduate school, has far greater latitude than would be the case if all matters had to be cleared through a single administrative position. In such a structure the right administrative hand may at times be ignorant of what the left one is doing. Tension and the probability of conflict are reduced under such an arrangement since the department head has more resources under his discretionary control than in a scalar system. Moreover, under such a structure two fundamental needs of an educational system are met: enough stability so that the routine aspects of running a large institution can be efficiently carried out, and enough flexibility so that the special provisions can be made from non-routine student or faculty needs.

A final type of structure might be termed modified scalar. Here the hierarchial line of authority is preserved, but at crucial points representatives of relevant organizational units participate in the decision making process. In the university this type is usually signalled by the presence of an "effective" faculty senate. An instance of this mode of organization is to be found at Western Michigan University. Philip Dennenfeld , who has twice served as president of the Senate of that university, lists as one of the beneficial function of the senate that:

> It contributes constantly to a real sense of cooperative
> enterprise between faculty and administration and minimizes
> the traditional conflict and antagonism which can sap the
> life of the university. It gives them common cause or,
> where this already existed but covertly, it makes manifest
> their common ends.[22]

Such an arrangement, as Dennenfeld points out, requires both a president and a governing board that believes in the democratic process and views the faculty member as a valuable asset in the policy-making process of the university and a faculty which is committed to faculty participation in the operation of the institution. Without these the organization may be a thing of beauty on paper and functionally beautiful as long as it does nothing, but worthless as soon as it takes itself seriously and adopts a position of some

consequence.[23] As of yet the conditions under which these two requirements are met are not clearly known.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The thesis of this paper has been that changes in the wider American society have had repercussions upon organizational structure of institutions of higher learning. Specifically, the increased salience of the business sector of American society has produced a corresponding emphasis upon a rationally efficient management of affairs within the university. This has been manifested by the creation and proliferation of specifically administrative positions in the university structure. Inasmuch as such positions have been allocated functions which were formerly within the jurisdiction of members of the teaching profession, there has been a reduction in the scope of control exercised by the latter group. Furthermore, there is enough difference between the normative orientations of the business and the academic social systems that differences have inevitably arisen relative to goals and means for achieving these goals. Both of these factors have contributed to the formation of conflict.situations within the university.

The merit of this approach is that it recognizes the intimate relationship which exists between an organization and its social environment. Research is needed which will reveal the conditions under which the interpenetration of the two social systems will result in conflict or in other forms of interaction. Such research will have implications for the analysis of organizations other than universities, and especially those which have a professionally oriented component, such as hospitals or ecclesiastical bodies.

FOOTNOTES

1. W. Allen Wallis, "Centripetal and Centrifugal Forces in University Organization," Daedalus, 93, 4 (Fall, 1964), p. 1073.

2. Lloyd S. Woodburne, Principles of College and University Administration, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), p. 19.

3. A. Lawrence Lowell, At War With Academic Traditions in America, (Harvard University Press, 1934), p. 290.

4. See. e.g., Irving Louis Horowitz, Three Worlds of Development: The Theory and Practice of International Stratification, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), Ch. 12, "Consensus and Dissensus in Social Development," pp. 364-89; Ralf Dahrendorf, Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959); Arnold Feldman, "Evolutional Theory and Social Change," in Social Change in Developing Areas, Herbert R. Barringer et. al., eds., (Cambridge, Mass., Schenkman Publishing Co., 1965), pp. 273-85; Pierre L. Van den Berghe, "Dialectic and Functionalism: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis," American Sociological Review, 28, 5 (October, 1963), pp. 695-705.

5. The following section is an adaptation of ideas expressed in Feldman, op. cit., pp. 280-85.

6. Dahrendorf, op. cit., p. 168.

7. Kenneth E. Boulding, "Organization and Conflict," Journal of Conflict Resolution, 1, 2 (June, 1957), p. 122.

8. Feldman, op. cit., p. 281.

9. John Jay Corson, Governance of Colleges and Universities, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1960), p. 14.

10. Francis H. Horn, "The Organization of Colleges and Universities," in Administrators in Higher Education, Gerald P. Burns, ed., (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), pp. 76-7.

11. See Charles Homer Haskins, The Rise of Universities, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1957), Originally given as the Colver Lectures in 1923 in Brown University. p. 1-25.

12. Clarence A. Schoenfeld, The University and Its Publics, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), p. 71.

13. Harold Enarson, "The Academic Vice-president or Dean," Administrators in Higher Education: Their Functions and Coordination, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), p. 114.

14. Alvin W. Gouldner, "Reciprocity and Autonomy in Functional Theory," in L. Z. Gross, ed., Symposium on Social Theory, (New York: Row, Peterson, 1958).

15. Raymond Mack and Richard C. Snyder, "The Analysis of Social Conflict: Toward an Overview and Synthesis," Journal of Conflict Resolution, 1, 2 (June, 1957), p. 243.

16. Voluntary Support...the Vital Ingredient, Pamphlet published by the Program for Progress, the University of Kansas, 1967.

17. W. Richard Scott, "Some Implications on Organization Theory for Research on Health Services," Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly, 44, 4 Part 2 (October, 1966), Reprinted by Public Health Service, 1966. This citation from Public Health Service pamphlet, pp. 39-40.

18. Ibid

19. Ibid

20. Richard Hofstadter and Walter P. Metzger, The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), p. 454.

21. Edith Lentz Hamilton, "Hospital Administration -- One of a Species," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 1, 460 (March, 1957).

22. Philip Dennenfeld, "Western Michigan University, Faculty Participation in the Government of the University: The Faculty Senate," *AAUP Bulletin*, 52, 4 (December, 1966), p. 394.

23. *Op. cit.*, p. 396.