Louis Kriesberg’s responses to questions about his life and career, posed by Larisa Titarenko, colleague in Sociology, Belarusian State University in Minsk, Belarus. January 20, 2021.

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1. *What was your path to sociology? Have you been impressed by the great European sociologists? Or inspired by Parsons or Merton? Or perhaps the WWII pushed you to study the social problems and understand the reasons for the deep social contradictions of the 20th century?*

I was driven by my wish to understand how wars and other terrible conflicts could be averted and peace secured. I discovered sociology in college and found it congenial with my thinking – I loved it. I believed that it would help me understand how dreadful conflicts and social problems could be reduced. I read Marx and Lenin in college and in graduate classes, we studied Weber and Durkheim and Adam Smith. Symbolic interaction was a major approach at the University of Chicago Sociology department (George Herbert Mead and his studentt, Herbert Blumer). The sentence “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.” was often mentioned to emphasize the importance of social meanings. It originated in the book, *The*Polish*Peasant in Europe and America*, written by the Polish sociologist Florian Znaniecki and the American sociologist W.I. Thomas.

The Chicago faculty did not take Parsons seriously. It seemed that his work simply set out a complex vocabulary, without much empirical content. As graduate students, we did read some Parsons on our own, but were not taken by it. One summer Shills went to Harvard to write a book with Parsons. Upon his return Shills was apologetic and defended himself, saying he had gotten his ideas in and let Parsons label them.

# After earning my PhD in 1953, I took a position of Instructor in the sociology department of the School of General Studies of Columbia University. I became familiar with Robert Merton, Paul Lazarsfeld, and Marty Lipset. I sat in on many of Merton’s class lectures and found he gave wonderfully crafted lectures, which were appropriately widely admired. Only once in a while the listeners believed the closing point did not warrant the build-up. He was a perfectionist as illustrated by a book manuscript of his that was available in the sociology department office. Students and colleagues read it and thought it was ready for publication. But Merton never seemed to believe that. It was said that this contributed to the exceedingly long times students took to complete their PhD dissertations.

My own theoretical approach was to be empirically based and focused on structural factors as shapers of conduct. I remained skeptical of functionalism. One common criticism of functionalism was that it did not account for social conflicts. Lewis Coser, who was politically active on the anti-Communist left, believed conflicts were important and realistically based. Having been a student of Merton’s, in his forties, he sought to integrate theory about conflicts with functionalism. He wrote *The Functions of Social Conflict* (1956), using some premises proposed by [Georg Simmel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georg_Simmel). But it seemed to me that to point out that a conflict is useful for one or more entity does not explain much for the genesis and course of conflicts. Although friends, Coser and I never discussed our differences. Significantly, he pointed out that conflicts can be good.

1. *What was the role of your family in your education and motivation to study sociology. Did your parents’ social background stimulate you to make a decision to do sociology? As far as I remember your parents arrived in the US from Tsarist Russia. Please shed light on your roots and making a decision on your professional future.*

My father came from what is now the Ukraine and my mother from what is now Belarus, from villages not distant from each other. They came as teenagers and met in Chicago. Their identity was as Jews. My father was a tailor and my mother a seamstress and they settled into owning a fur store. A primary identity for me was being Jewish. I lived in Chicago in a working class, multi-ethnic (not Jewish) neighborhood. My three older brothers were the major influence for my social, political, and intellectual views. They were intellectuals, peace oriented, and interested in arts, my brother Irving, closest to me in age, went on to be an artist. I had some talent for art and studied it in Mexico for over a year (1944), becoming fluent in Spanish.

My personality had some unusual features. I felt that I somehow had to strive to help humanity. I also had a natural tendency to be empathetic to others, identifying with suffering people. Third, I abhorred violence and rarely got angry. In retrospect, I would add that I am resilient, optimistic, and live in the present time. I was always aware of many inequalities and often viewed them as unfair, injurious, and in need of correction.

1. *Why did you go to the University of Chicago? How important was this university in your education and socialization as a scholar? Who were the scholars that influenced you most of all at this university?*

I went to the University of Chicago because Ruth, the wife of my brother Irving, told me to do so. I entered in 1945, with no idea how special the college and the sociology department were. The college was organized as 2 years after graduating a conventional high school and the M.A. could follow in 3 more years. Having placed out of some college courses by entrance examinations, I was taking graduate courses the second year I was there. Anticipating focusing on the Cold War, I studied Russian intensively for two summers, but failed to become fluent. I lived in student-run cooperative housing, with wonderfully politically diverse and bright students. I discovered sociology. The whole experience was fundamental for my education.

Everett Hughes was especially important in learning how to do field work, inferring questions and insights from evidence. He taught a fine course on occupations, noting how professions were self-serving by controlling entry and setting their own rules of conduct. It was a view from below, unlike Robert Merton and others at Columbia who were more deferential to the elites. Other faculty who influenced me included Edward Shills, Morris Janowitz, Morton Grodzins, David Riesman, Robert Redfield and Sol Tax. None, however, were working on the matter that was central for me, making peace. I learned much from my fellow students in a wonderful post World War II generation. including Howard Becker, Gladys and Kurt Lang, Erving Goffman, [Helena Znaniecki Lopata](https://www.google.com/search?rlz=1C1GCEB_enUS876US876&sxsrf=ALeKk02ehaHPfheHTSqCeClIHziDk2NsYw:1612281690502&q=Helena+Znaniecki+Lopata&stick=H4sIAAAAAAAAAONgVuLSz9U3MK0oNy0oeMRoyi3w8sc9YSmdSWtOXmNU4-IKzsgvd80rySypFJLgYoOy-KR4uJC08SxiFfdIzUnNS1SIykvMy0xNzs5U8MkvSCxJBAAEiyBKYAAAAA), Herb Gans, Jerry Handel, and Jack Feldman.

In 1950, I spent the summer in West Germany. Another graduate student, Isi Fischer, was from Germany and helped make my arrangements, including serving at an international work camp in

Donaueschingen and staying at her mother’s home in West Berlin. I traveled some, saw Dachau concentration camp, and spent time in East Berlin. In later years, on other visits to Germany, I maintained my friendship with Isi.

My MA dissertation in 1950 was on changing concepts of success and security among retail furriers, which resulted in my first scholarly publication. My PhD dissertation linked my work on occupations with examining possible patriotic sentiments influencing economic conduct during wartime. My work was part of a larger project on national loyalty directed by Grodzins and supported by it. My findings were reported in two journal articles.

1. *Your publications in the 1950s and 1960s were on diverse topics, what pattern do they portray? Your career as a young PhD scholar started at the prestigious Columbia University (1953-1956). After a Fulbright year in Germany (1956-1957), you returned to the University of Chicago, which included a fellowship year at the Law School and then four years as a senior study director at the National Opinion Research Center (NORC). I suppose these years were important for your professional life. It is not clear for me why you moved to Syracuse in 1962. Was it your professional desire to join Maxwell School and build your career there? At Syracuse you have been Chair of the Department of, Sociology (1974-77) and served as president of the Society for the Study of Social Problems (1983-1984). You have remained associated with Syracuse University. Are you satisfied with your professional achievements at Syracuse University?*

In my early academic years, I struggled to find a way to apply sociology to peacemaking. I sought to convince my colleagues that such work was possible and desirable. At the same time, I did work on mainstream sociological topics because that was fun and that was what I was hired to do.

My three years at Columbia University were challenging and my contract was not renewed. I had no previous teaching experience and initiallyworked hard to pass on too much material. Gradually, I improved and discovered I was more successful with courses about unfamiliar subjects, as I learned with my students. I became a competent instructor in my second year.

I set out to do some peace-related research. I thought I might study the UN Secretariat and interviewed several people there. I learned much but did not conceive of a good research question. I also undertook a study of policy making in American organizations associated with two international non-governmental organizations, the International Chamber of Commerce and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions. I conducted several interviews with leaders of the American member organizations. I gained fascinating information but did not publish any articles based on this study.

While at Columbia, I was hired by the Bureau of Applied Social Research, established by Paul Lazarsfeld. I was tasked to review the literature on ongoing community conflicts and prepare a report for the Twentieth Century Fund. My draft report was deemed insufficient and it was turned over to Jim Coleman to revise. At that time, he was a senior graduate student at the Bureau. His revision was published as a pamphlet, with due credit to me.   
  
My experience at Columbia was enlightening. It broadened my understanding of sociology and greatly expanded my network of colleagues. Moreover, my analyses of community conflicts initiated my thinking about the stages of conflicts and their variability. I was still fumbling my way to shape a research agenda, applying sociology to peacemaking.

I had applied for and was awarded a Fulbright Research Fellowship for 1956-1957, based in Cologne, Germany. It was an amazingly exciting time to be in Europe. I arrived in August, in time for the meetings of the International Sociological Association. Some of us Americans learned that delegations were coming from the Soviet Union and countries of Eastern Europe with Communist governments. Since we knew the Soviet leaders viewed sociology as antagonistic, we wondered who would come. The Soviet delegation included journalists, philosophers, anthropologists, etc., but no sociologists. The Polish delegation included many sociologists and Marty Lipset arranged a meeting between the Poles and several Americans, including me. We anticipated some arguments between us and the Poles. The argument however was between two groups of Poles. One group of strict Soviet Marxists belittled empirical research as unnecessary. The other group insisted on the importance of research, for example understanding how workers viewed certain matters. They asserted: “We are students of Znaniecki.” Apparently, there were underground sociology classes.

My research in Germany examined how the new European Coal and Steel Community functioned to integrate Germans into a European identity -- a study of conflict transformation. I interviewed corporate and union leaders in the coal and steel industries and also utilized national survey data collected at my request. I published three journal articles reporting my findings. In my time in Germany, with my high school German, I became fluent in German and laid the ground for subsequent connections with peace researchers in Germany.

I returned to Chicago in 1957 for a senior fellowship year at the University of Chicago Law School. Once back in Chicago, I wanted to stay and took the position of a senior study director at NORC, learning by doing large-scale survey research. This was too distant, however, from my desire to do peace research. In 1962, I was recruited by colleagues at Syracuse University to help out on a large study of social mobility and public housing. It was an exciting time in Syracuse, and I was engaged in research and activism relating to the war on poverty and the civil rights struggle. My book, Mothers in Poverty was one product. I came to Syracuse University, anticipating I would also have the freedom and support to do peace research. That turned out to be true and I never left. I am quite satisfied.

1. *Since the 1970s you started systematically to do research on social conflicts and conflict resolution. You constructed your own theory of conflict resolutions, became the founding director of the Program on the Analysis and Resolution of Conflicts (PARC) at Syracuse University (1986). What was most important for you in these years? And what was the most difficult to achieve?*

By the end of the 1960s, I had discovered many sociologists and other social scientists who were doing social research relating to averting war and securing peace. I edited a book to demonstrate these new understandings. It was *Social Processes in International Relations,* published in 1968. Contributors included Morris Janowitz, Lewis Coser, William Gamson, Edward Shills, Robert C. Angell, Johan Galtung, Amitai Etzioni, Chadwick Alger, and Karl Deutsch. Soon, as the field of conflict resolution emerged in the early 1970s, I also got to know, Elise and Kenneth Boulding Gene Sharp, Herb Kelman, and many others around the world. At Syracuse, a group was forming with Neil Katz, Stuart Thorson, Terrell Northrup, and others. I was finally a member of several overlapping communities of peace and conflict resolution academics and practitioners. I was part of a growing new field.

What was most important for me in the 1970s was that I had begun doing peace-related empirical research. I published several articles on international non-governmental organizations, as an element of the underlying social organization for peaceful relations. I soon decided to devote all my work on peace-related matters and to focus on current major conflicts: the Cold War and the Israeli-Arab/Palestinian conflicts. I made 4 study trips to the Soviet Union (1975-1991) and 14 to the Middle East (1971-2010). I interviewed officials, activists, and other analysts in the relevant countries and utilized relevant documents and analyses, and survey data. In addition to journal articles, in 1992, my book on this research was published: *International Conflict Resolution: The U.S.-U.S.S.R. and Arab-Israeli Cases.*

Instead of examining only conflicts escalating destructively, I examined how conflicts de-escalated and were transformed. That strategy facilitated formulating novel concepts and propositions. I drew attention to the stages of conflict, to their transformation, and their inter-connections. This underlay formulating a general approach to understanding and waging conflicts constructively. In 1973 I published *The Sociology of Social Conflicts* and in 1982, a more refined version, entitled *Social Conflicts.* Then, in 1998, I published the first edition of *Constructive Conflicts,* which has had five editions.

In the 1980s another important matter thrilled me. With the establishment of PARC, we attracted many excellent graduate students eager to learn about peace and conflict resolution.

They did excellent research, as evident in an edited book, *Social Conflicts and Collective Identities*, edited by Patrick Coy, and Lynne M. Woehrle, 2000. The book consists of chapters by several of the students for whom I had served as PhD dissertation adviser. The graduates of PARC have and continue to establish and staff programs across the Uniteed States and in many other countries. Many of them are active practitioners of constructive conflicts.

I also believe I was acqiring influence within the expanding peace and conflict field. My standing in mainstream sociology helped me give legitimacy in the mainstream to the field and to indiviuals in it. From 1978 to 1990, I edited the annual volume of Research in Social Movements, Conflicts, and Change. From 1989 to 2009, I was editor of the "Studies in Peace and Conflict Resolution" series of the Sracuse University Press. I have been on editorial boards of numerous journals in the field, headed the peace and conflicts units in many American and international sociology and peace associations, and consulted with other programs. For further details see my CV on my website: https://lkriesbe.expressions.syr.edu/

Most difficult was and is influencing the public and officials to adopt better conflict practices. My efforts to influence the public at large and government officials has taken two related forms. I have written articles, op-eds, and blogs and also spoken to influence the general public about conflict resolution and the constructive conflict approach and about their application to specific conflicts. I have also supported and worked with many peace groups and organizations working for peace and justice in specific conflicts. In particular, in 1982, I joined with a few others to establish the Syracuse Area Middle East Dialogue group (SAMED). Its members are three kinds of Americans, in equal number: Jewish, Palestinian/Arab, and neither of them. We share our understandings and seek consensus about American government actions to assist peoples in the region to have peaceful and just relations. Since 1982, we advocate for policies we think are productive of peace and justice.

1. *What was your attitude to social theory of Karl Marx who also studied social conflicts and constructed a theory of social revolution as a way out of the social contradictions?*

I included work by Marx in my graduate course on social theory for several years, but in my research and theorizing about class, draw on Max Weber and the class, status and power dimensions. I also tend to regard the complexities of multiple interconnected conflicts as more useful than Marx’s approach. See my books: *Mothers in Poverty*, 1970 and *Social Inequality*, 1979.

1. *Your friend and colleague Charles Tilly studied social revolution while you studied social conflicts. Are there big differences between these two social phenomena?*

Social conflict is a much broader term, including struggles of widely different sizes and methods of struggle. Revolutions are a particular kind of social conflict. They are large-scale, marking efforts to bring about profound changes, and often conducted with great violence or threats of violence. Sometimes revolutions refer to large-scale major changes in technology, fashion, or other customary matter.

1. *Among your numerous articles and books in the 1990-2000s, which ones are most important for you? Why?*

The 5th edition of *Constructive Conflicts,* co-authored with Bruce Dayton, is the most recent exposition of the constructive conflict approach. My book *Realizing Peace,* 2015, is an application of the constructive conflict approach to American foreign policy, explaining its successes and its failures (with alternative strategies discussed). Important articles and chapters are available for download on my website.

1. *When I teach a course on contemporary Western sociology in Minsk (where I am employed at the Belarusian State University), I place you in the lecture on social conflict. Maybe it is a bit narrow, however, social inequality is not a special field – it is a topic everywhere in sociology, while conflicts are quite clear and differ from, say, topics on social structure or culture. How would you yourself describe your innovative contribution to sociology of conflict and/or sociology in general?*

I think it is in helping to foster attention to large-scale conflicts and promoting attention to policy engagement. More specifically, I believe I have made a contribution to developing a constructive approach to social conflicts.

1. *Do you think that your field of study closely relates to the study of democracy? What are the relationships between social conflicts and democracy? Personally, I see a link between the resolution of conflicts and justice, however, I am doubtful that all resolutions of conflicts are democratic. Maybe I am wrong, could you please show connection between conflicts and democracy if it exists?*

I think of democracy as an institutionalized way of conducting conflicts constructively. Of course, there are many forms and qualities of democracy. Some of them fall far from being constructive. There is growing interest in the ways that knowledge about the practice of constructive conflict and of collaboration are for effective governance. This is discussed in a book Catherine Gerard and I co-edited: *Conflict and Collaboration: For Better or Worse.*

(2018).

1. *During your long professional life, did you have close colleagues in the field of sociology? Maybe some of them being your colleagues became your friends? I mentioned Charles Tilly, however, I am sure, you have many close colleagues. Was such relationship useful and fruitful for your career?*

Certainly. Actually, most of my friends have been colleagues. I have always relied on collaboration with colleagues for many aspects of my work. Sometimes I have co-authored articles and books and co-edited books. That both reduces the task and expands the product.

I often consult with colleagues to learn about persons and thoughts are relevant a current project.

1. *Why do you usually describe your current field of study as “peace studies and analysis of conflict resolution”? Not all the conflicts can be de-escalated and bring piece to the conflict participants. Do you agree that conflict resolution is a relatively small part of the area of conflicts analysis (connected with the name of L.Coser), and there are many other directions of study conflicts that may lead to wars (not peace)? In today’s global world local wars and bloody conflicts are everywhere. Do you think that their participants simply do not want to negotiate the situation and bring the peace to their people (countries)?*

I certainly recognize that many conflicts are waged destructively. It is necessary to understand how that happens and how that can be avoided. Most people, most of the time do not want to wage destructive conflicts. Often, they say the other side forces them to be fierce and even violent. So, I think it is useful to point out that conflicts can be conducted so that some mutual gains (perhaps uneven) are achieved. After all, we have institutionalized ways to handle many conflicts. For example, see labor relations in American history.

1. *. As far as I know you selected different conflicts: large-scale conflicts (among countries), smaller-scale conflicts (inside countries), and inter-group conflicts of any kind. Also, you analyzed conflicts on all stages. Why did you focus primarily on the large scale conflicts?*

From the start, for me, wars and the threats of mass violence were the matters that impelled me to study sociology and focus on ways to reduce the likelihood of waging bloody wars and revolutions. As a youth I grew up with images of the Japanese military forces in China, of a civil war in Spain, and then the horrors of World War II. I was fascinated and horrified by them.

1. *In 2020 an acute social conflict began in Belarus after the presidential elections. It has been going on for several months now, and neither side of the conflict wants to compromise. The trajectory of this conflict and its possible transformation is not clear (at least for me). If you have heard about this conflict (and such conflicts over power have become typical for post-Soviet countries – let me remind about Georgia, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine), maybe you can explain why there is no resolution in such conflicts? In some countries de-escalation was short-lived, other countries go from one conflict to another. Is it simply a “power struggle” between the elites? Or there are deeper social reasons behind the inter-country conflicts? Perhaps such conflicts are typical for other regions of the world? I believe that sociology of conflict can explain them and give possible constructive policies for the future.*

I would not try to answer this complex question here. I would need to do much more research about the specific cases. I will only make a few observations. The breakup of the Soviet Union was more peaceful than many people anticipated. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) ws helpful in resolving citizen issues relating to Russians in the Baltic countries. Ethnic differences can be too readily exploited by would-be political leaders. Non-governmental civic organizations incorporating diverse ethnicities, with visions of broad identities and visions might be useful. Self-serving interventions by external actors might be contained. Multilateral assistance might be useful Track-two channels can be useful. Training in nonviolent action can be useful. Finally, knowledge of constructive conflict strategies might be helpful.

***15****. Let us make a shift to a question related to your 90th jubilee. In a book published in 2016 by Springer and devoted to you, the title named you “a pioneer in peace and constructive conflict resolution studies”. What does it mean for you? How else can you metaphorically define your place and contribution to the sociology of conflict?*

Christopher Mitchell and Johannes Botes undertook a project of interviewing “Parents of the Field.” I was included (available on YouTube). I suppose simpler, more concrete words that might refer to my contribution was to have been an early leader or an early explorer.

My career contributions to the sociology of conflict are indicated in my answer to question 5. Here, I stress the conceptual contributions that I believe I have made. A primary contribution is help raise the salience of conflict as a dimension of most social relations, and particularly the salience of large-scale contentions. I have raised the recognition that conflicts are more than a forceful eruption but move through many stages. Indeed, many conflicts are not resolved and never disappear. Rather, they are transformed becoming cooperative, collaborative or take on a different structure of domination.

I think too helped recognition of the inter-connectedness of conflicts over time and social space. Often, they are nested, like Russian dolls, ay different scales. Many fights are concurrent, overlapping each other. Each adversary in a conflict has its own set of concurrent fights.

I have stressed the importance of noncoercive inducements in conflicts.

Finally, by stressing the interactive nature of conflicts and the variety of ways they may be waged, the possibility of choosing better or worse courses of actions becomes apparent. Sociology can then be a form of practice as well as study. The analysis does not yield only a

Depiction of a determined path. Policy choices may be revealed.

1. *. And the last question. What would help make Russian sociologists’ work more visible and meaningful at the global level?*

Russian sociologists might have greater participation in the International Sociological Association and other such organizations. After all, we first met at its World Congress in Mexico in 1982. They might publish in the various sociological journals. Another thought: research that compares particular phenomena in Russia and in other societies would be attractive.