

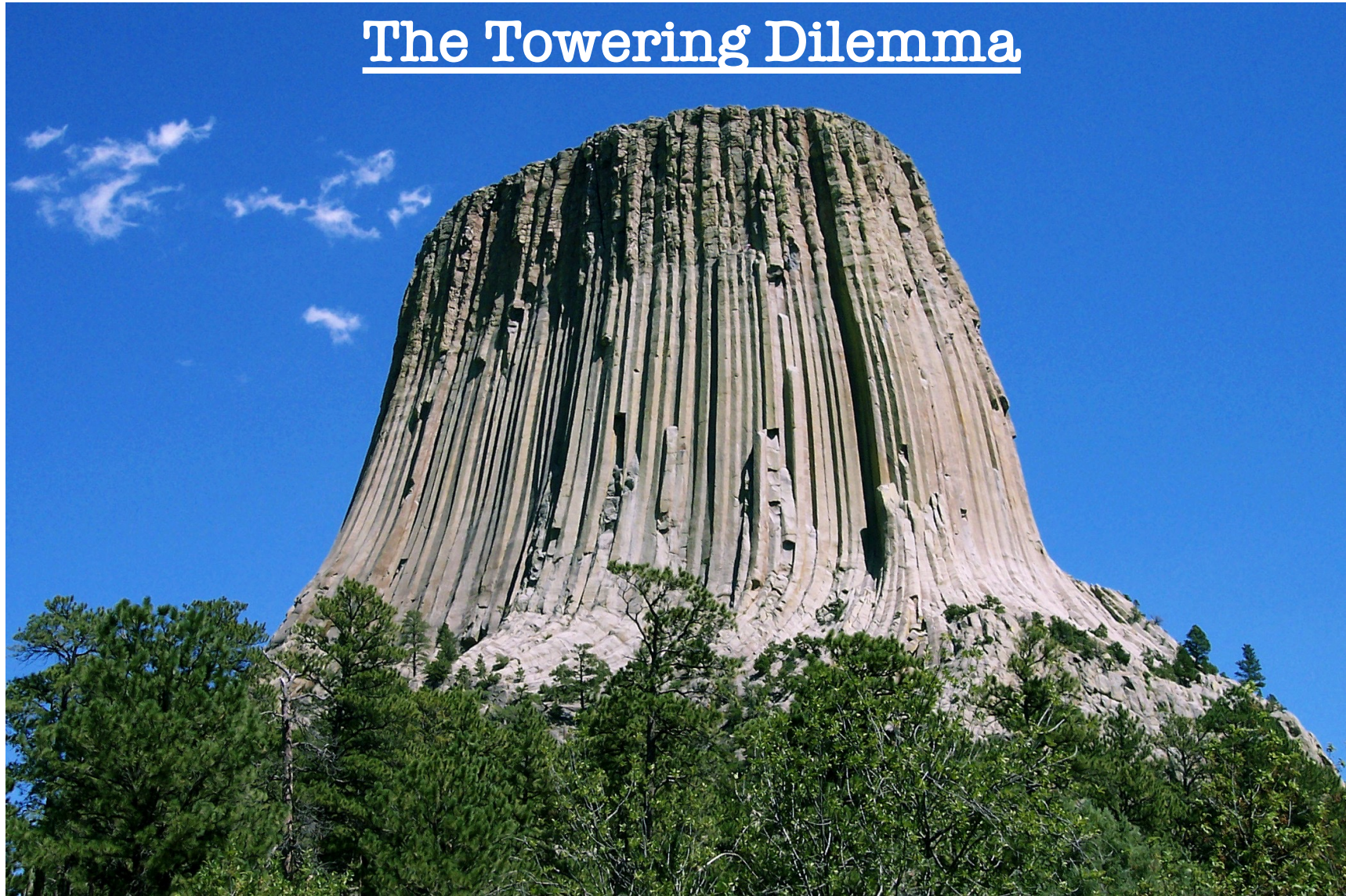


# SUSTAINABILITY AND ECO-SOCIAL CHANGES

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Lesson 6 - Theories for environmental conflicts

# The Towering Dilemma





## THE PLACE AND THE CONFLICT

*Devils Tower, Wyoming – A quick recap*

### DEVILS TOWER

**264 metres**

above the surrounding  
landscape

**First national monument**

in the United States (1906)

**500,000 visitors**

per year

**220 climbing routes,**

6,000 climbers/year

### THE STAKEHOLDERS

**American Indian tribes** Sacred site,  
ceremonies, spiritual practices

**Rock climbers** Technical challenge, sport,  
identity

**Commercial guide companies** Economic  
interests, licences

**National Park Service** Legal mandate,  
cultural & natural heritage

**Naturalists / ecologists** Biodiversity,  
nesting raptors



## **DEBORAH'S DILEMMA**

*Superintendent Deborah Liggett, 1994 – Choosing between six alternatives*

She is not ignorant about the conflict. The problem is almost the opposite: she is drowning in information that points in every direction at once.

### **NOT a technical decision**

No formula produces the correct answer. You cannot calculate the spiritual value of a sacred site.

### **NOT a purely legal decision**

The law offers options but does not choose. First Amendment and Treaty rights both point in opposite directions.

### **NOT an environmental science decision**

Ecologists can describe nesting patterns. They cannot weigh spiritual value against economic value.

**This is a SOCIAL decision – competing values, asymmetric power, historical injustice, different rationalities. Social theory is the right tool.**



## **THREE THEORETICAL LENSES**

*Each theory starts from a different first question – and sees different solutions*

### **01 Conflict Theory**

#### **First question:**

*"Who has power?"*

### **02 Rational Action Theory**

#### **First question:**

*"What do actors want?"*

### **03 Relational Theory**

#### **First question:**

*"What relationships exist?"*

*In practice, sociologists use all three at the same time. Today we treat them as alternatives – one lens at a time – to see what each one reveals, and what it misses.*



# 01 CONFLICT THEORY

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"Who has power?"  
Marx · Nancy Fraser



## CONFLICT THEORY: CORE IDEA

Society is not a level playing field

### THE STARTING POINT

The apparent normality of social life — rules, institutions, accepted ways of doing things — is not neutral. It reflects and reproduces the interests of those who have power. The categories we use to organise social life (property, legality, culture) are not natural or universal. They emerged from historical conflicts and continue to serve some groups better than others.

#### Karl Marx (1818–1883)

Dominant class controls not just the economy but also the state, legal system, and dominant ideas. The ideas of the ruling class, Marx wrote, are in every epoch the ruling ideas.

#### Nancy Fraser (b. 1947)

##### Two forms of injustice:

**Distributive** unequal material resources

**Recognition** refusal to acknowledge culture, identity, or ways of knowing as legitimate

#### POWER ↓

Dominant class

State & legal system

Ideology & culture

Subaltern groups



## **CONFLICT THEORY APPLIED: DEVILS TOWER**

Starting from the historical question — who was here first?

### **HISTORICAL DISPOSSESSION**

Tribes inhabited the region for thousands of years. 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie recognised tribal sovereignty. 1877: the US took the land by force. 1906: national monument declared without consulting the tribes.

### **DISTRIBUTIVE INJUSTICE**

Guide companies' interests can be measured and quantified. Tribal interests are spiritual and cultural. In a society that measures value in money, this asymmetry is a structural disadvantage.

### **THE ERASED FRAMING**

The NPS plan speaks of "competing uses" and "two principal users" — treating the outcome of dispossession as a neutral starting point. Conflict theory says: that framing is itself a political act.

### **RECOGNITION INJUSTICE**

Public comments claimed "there is nothing sacred about Devils Tower — it is only an extinct volcano." These statements refuse to acknowledge centuries of spiritual tradition as legitimate.



## **CONFLICT THEORY: WHAT SOLUTION DOES IT POINT TOWARD?**

Justice first – not compromise between unequal starting points

1

Acknowledge historical dispossession officially

2

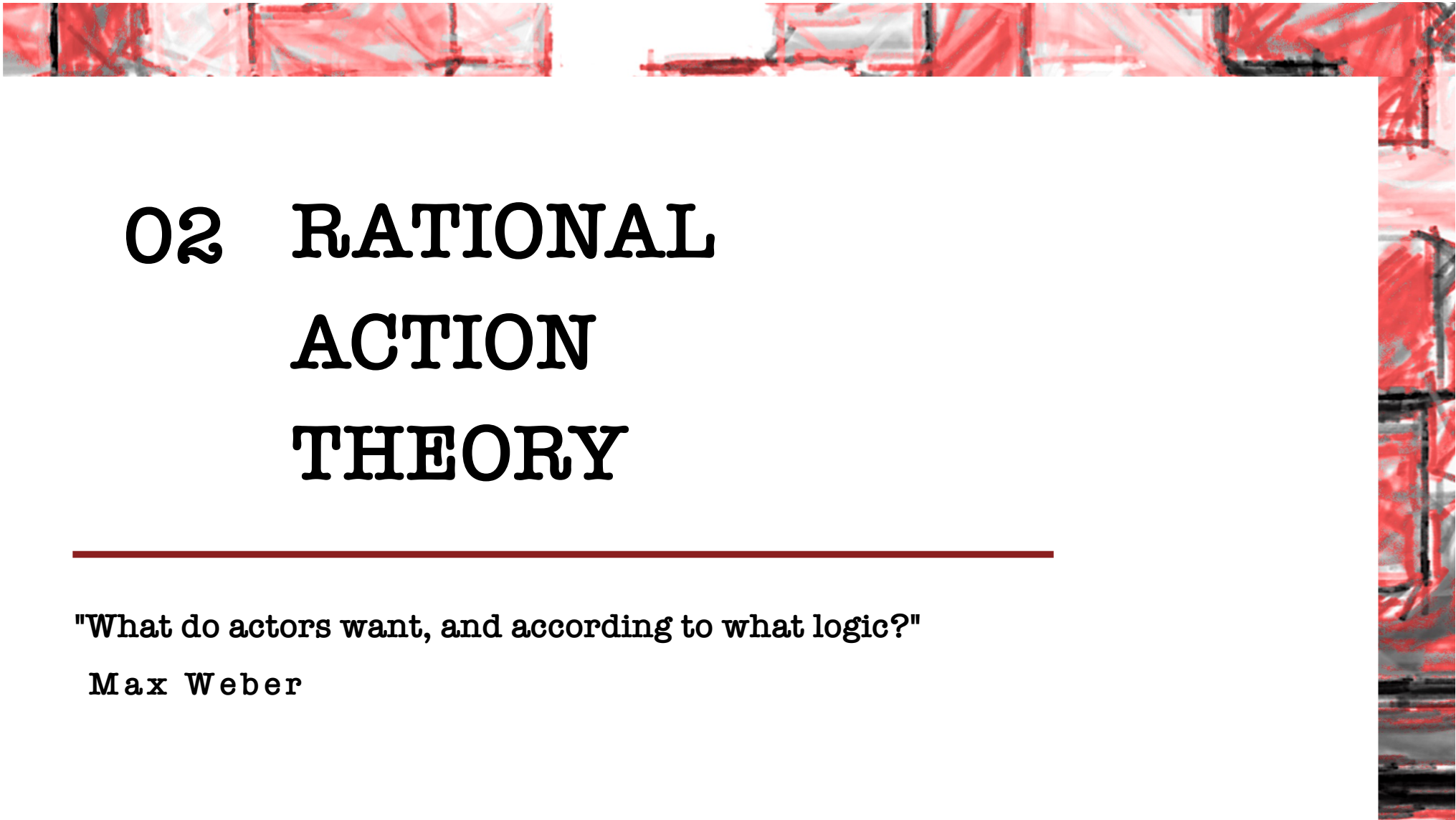
Recognise that Devils Tower is a sacred site – before any management decision

3

Tribal spiritual use takes priority during June (most significant ceremonial period)

4

Formal consultation: tribes get a structural role in ongoing governance



# 02 RATIONAL ACTION THEORY

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"What do actors want, and according to what logic?"

Max Weber



## **RATIONAL ACTION THEORY: MAX WEBER'S FOUR TYPES**

Understanding social action from the inside – from actors' own meaning

### **MAX WEBER (1864-1920)**

Sociology must understand social action from the inside. His framework identifies four ideal types of social action – not rigid categories, but powerful analytical tools.

#### **Instrumental Rationality**

Acting to achieve a specific goal through the most efficient available means.

#### **Value Rationality**

Acting out of commitment to a value or belief, regardless of practical consequences.

#### **Traditional Action**

Acting because it is what has always been done – out of habit or custom.

#### **Affective Action**

Acting out of emotion, passion, or feeling.



## MAPPING THE RATIONALITIES AT DEVILS TOWER

Each group acts according to a different internal logic

### **Instrumental**

**Commercial guide companies** Their relationship to the tower is economic. Every day of closure is a direct loss of revenue. They will accept restrictions only if the cost is clearly bounded and predictable.

### **Instrumental + Value**

**Recreational climbers** Want access to a technically exceptional site, but also have a deeper commitment to climbing as identity. Restrictions feel like an attack on something meaningful.

### **Value**

**American Indian tribes** Their relationship to the tower is not negotiable in the language of costs and benefits. The sacredness of the site is a non-negotiable commitment rooted in centuries of tradition.

### **Institutional + Value**

**National Park Service** Follows its legal mandate (institutional rationality) + value rationality expressed in its mission to protect natural and cultural heritage for future generations.



## **RATIONAL ACTION THEORY: THE CORE PROBLEM & SOLUTION**

*When two logics cannot reach each other*

### **THE INCOMPATIBLE RATIONALITIES**

Instrumental logic operates in a register of negotiation: you want access; I want recognition; let us find the overlap.

Value rationality does not work that way. You cannot tell someone 'you may pray here from July to May.' The sacred is not proportional.

From a Weberian perspective, tribal members who 'do not negotiate' are being perfectly coherent – they are simply not playing the same game.

### **WHAT SOLUTION?**

80% of climbers use only 23 of 220 routes. A voluntary June closure (Alt. 3-4) costs climbers one month in a season of several months. Economic cost is real but bounded.

### **Key limit of Rational Action Theory**

*If the tribes are value-rational actors for whom no partial solution is adequate, the most carefully designed compromise will still fail to satisfy them. This is not a failure of negotiation skill – it is a structural feature of the conflict.*



# 03 RELATIONAL THEORY

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"What kind of relationships exist between the groups?"  
Georg Simmel · Robert Putnam





## **RELATIONAL THEORY: CORE IDEA & KEY THINKERS**

Social life is made of interactions, not just structures or interests

Social life is not primarily made of structures, ideologies, or interests. It is made of interactions. The quality of those relations – trust, understanding, reciprocity, or hostility – has profound effects on whether conflicts can be resolved.

### **GEORG SIMMEL (1858-1918)**

The proper object of sociology is *Vergesellschaftung* – the ongoing process of association. Crucially, Simmel did not see conflict as the absence of social interaction. He saw it as a particular form of interaction, and sometimes a very productive one.

The problem is not conflict itself – it is the destruction of the relational fabric that makes any interaction possible.

### **ROBERT PUTNAM (b. 1941)**

**Bonding capital** Strong ties within a group – solidarity, shared identity.

**Bridging capital** Weaker ties connecting different groups – makes democratic cooperation across difference possible.



## **RELATIONAL THEORY APPLIED: A POVERTY OF RELATIONSHIPS**

Climbers and tribes share the same physical space – but inhabit entirely separate social worlds


An elder teaching children about tradition hears, from above, climbers shouting and using vulgar language.

A climber arrives at a site they love for its technical challenge and finds it surrounded by ceremony – and feels like an intruder.

**Absence of bridging capital** Neither group knows the other as people. Every action by one group is interpreted through the worst available frame.

**Biased consultation process** The NPS collected written comments – a procedure that favours organised, administratively literate groups. Tribal voices were fewer and shorter – not because they care less, but because the process was designed around the dominant culture.

**Conflict intensified by distance** The conflict is not only about competing interests or historical injustice. It is also sustained and intensified by the absence of any mutual understanding.





## **RELATIONAL THEORY: SOLUTION & A NECESSARY CAUTION**

The plan is not the solution – it is the scaffold

### **WHAT SOLUTION?**

- The relational approach asks: whatever alternative is chosen, will it create or destroy conditions for a better relationship over time?
- A mandatory closure imposed without dialogue might protect ceremonies but will deepen resentment – making future cooperation harder.
- A voluntary closure + cross-cultural programme (joint events, ranger conversations, opportunities to encounter each other as people) can build something more durable.
- Sustainable management cannot be imposed from above. It must be built from below, through ongoing relationships.

### **⚠ A NECESSARY CAUTION**

An emphasis on relationship-building can become a way of asking the marginalised group to do the work of repairing a situation they did not create.

Relational theory works best when it is paired with an honest acknowledgement of the structural asymmetry that conflict theory reveals.

## THREE THEORIES COMPARED

Each theory asks a different question – and sees a different problem

	<b>CONFLICT THEORY</b>	<b>RATIONAL ACTION</b>	<b>RELATIONAL THEORY</b>
<b>First question</b>	Who has power?	What do actors want?	What relationships exist?
<b>Core problem</b>	Historical injustice & structural inequality	Mismatch between incompatible rationalities	Absence of bridging capital between groups
<b>Goal of solution</b>	Restore justice; recognise the marginalised group	Find the workable distribution of costs	Build trust; create conditions for cooperation
<b>Preferred alternatives</b>	Alt. 4-6 + tribal governance role	Alt. 3-4, negotiated & bounded	Any alternative + sustained dialogue
<b>Key strength</b>	Reveals power and history	Practical, actor-centred, negotiable	Focused on long-term sustainability
<b>Key limit</b>	Can feel like a verdict, not an analysis	Cannot resolve non-negotiable values	May burden the marginalised with repair work



## WHAT THE COMPARISON SHOWS: BLIND SPOTS

Each theory identifies something real – and misses something real

### Conflict Theory

#### ● STRENGTH

The historical dispossession of the tribes is real – conflict theory does not invent it.

#### ■ LIMIT

Risks reducing complex human motivations to a function of power.

### Rational Action Theory

#### ● STRENGTH

The competing rationalities of guide companies and tribes are real and precisely mappable.

#### ■ LIMIT

Fails when the conflict touches values that are not tradeable.

### Relational Theory

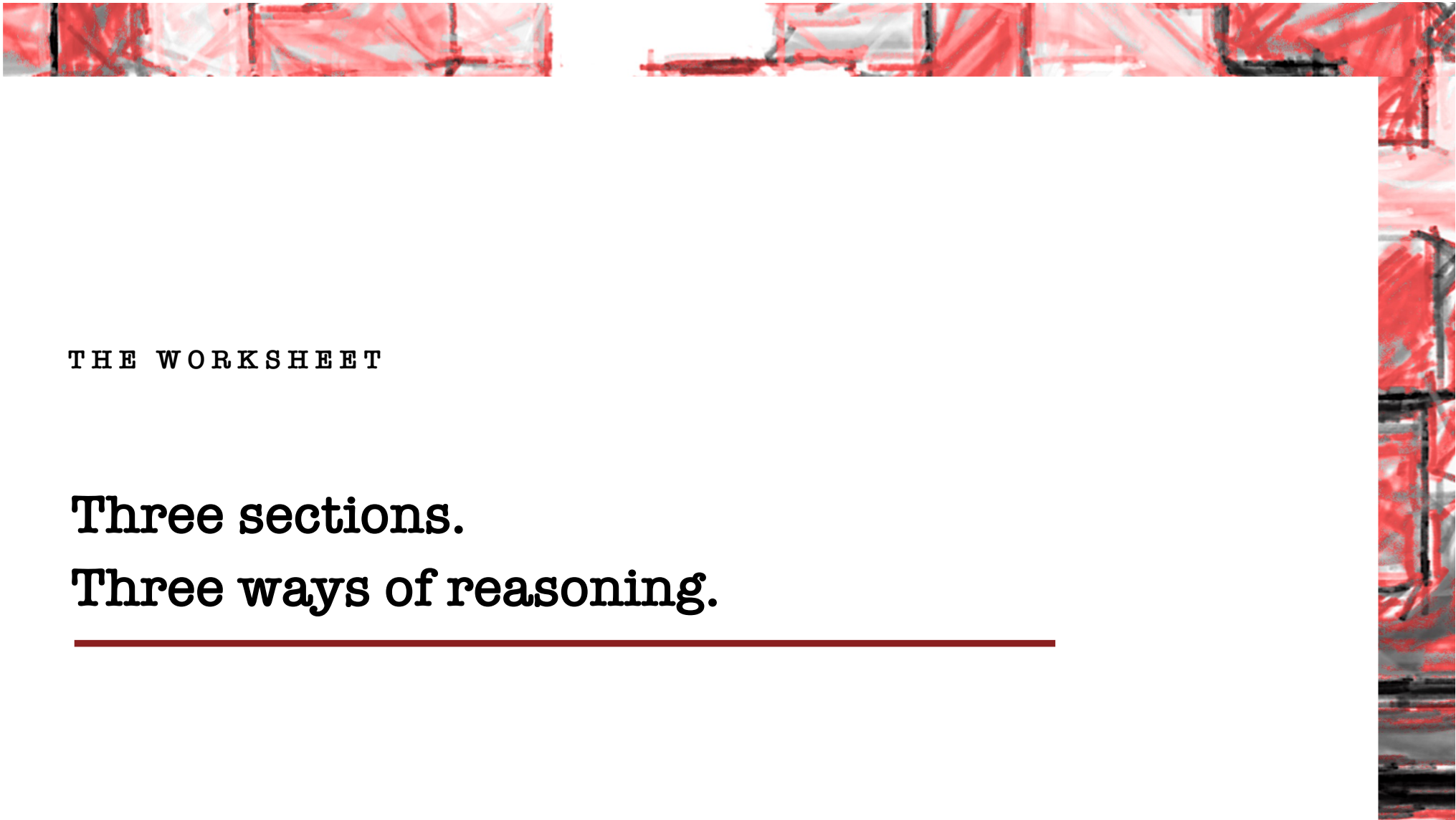
#### ● STRENGTH

The absence of mutual understanding between climbers and tribal members is real.

#### ■ LIMIT

Can focus on process at the expense of structural conditions – and may ask the wrong people to do the work of reconciliation.

A decision that is historically just, practically workable, and relationally generative is very hard to find – but that is the standard social theory asks us to aim for.





THE WORKSHEET

**Three sections.**

**Three ways of reasoning.**

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1. Allow unlimited climbing and bolting year-round.
  2. Continue current monument climbing management policies and restrictions.
  3. Phase in a voluntary closure of the tower to climbing during June, a time that was deemed significant because of use of the tower by Indians for ceremonies around the summer solstice. The June closure would become fully implemented in 1997. Regulated new bolting would be allowed. Close climbing routes within 50 meters of nesting raptors.
  4. Impose voluntary June closure to climbing in 1995 with a ban on new bolt placements (replacement of existing bolts or pitons would be permitted). Climbing routes would be closed within 50 meters of nesting raptors.
  5. Mandate a June closure of the tower to climbing, beginning in 1995, with no new or replacement bolting permitted.
  6. Indefinitely close the tower to all climbing year-round, beginning in 1995. All bolts would be removed from the tower, and trails to and on the tower would be rehabilitated to a more natural condition.