

Student Worksheet. **Three Lenses, One Case**
Applying Social Theory to the Devils Tower Conflict

How to use this worksheet

This worksheet has three sections - one for each theoretical lens introduced in today's lecture. For each section, read the brief theory recap at the top, then answer the four questions that follow. Apply only that section's theory when answering.

LENS 1

Conflict Theory

Theory in brief

Conflict theory argues that society is structured by power and inequality. Some groups have more economic resources, political influence, and cultural recognition than others. This is not accidental — it is the result of historical processes. Karl Marx saw conflict as rooted in economic inequality between classes. Nancy Fraser identified two types of injustice: distributive (unequal material resources) and recognition injustice (refusing to acknowledge a group's culture or voice as legitimate). For conflict theory, real justice requires both redistribution and recognition.

Q1. Power and marginalisation

In the Devils Tower conflict, which group would a conflict theorist identify as the dominant group, and which as the subaltern (marginalised) group? Use at least two specific pieces of evidence from the case to support your answer.

Q2. Two types of injustice

Using Fraser's framework, identify one example of distributive injustice and one example of recognition injustice in this case. For each, explain what makes it an injustice according to this theory.

Distributive injustice:

Recognition injustice:

Q3. What solution does this theory suggest?

From a conflict theory perspective, which management alternative (1–6) would be most just? Explain your reasoning. Is there anything beyond the management plan itself that conflict theory would demand?

Q4. Strengths and limits

What does conflict theory reveal about this case that a more neutral analysis might miss? What might it overlook or oversimplify?

LENS 2

Rational Theory

Theory in brief

Rational action theory asks: what do people want, and what logic drives their behaviour? Weber identified four types of social action:

- Instrumental rationality: acting to achieve a goal in the most efficient way (cost-benefit logic).
- Value rationality: acting because of a deep, non-negotiable commitment to a value.
- Traditional action: acting because 'this is how it has always been done'.
- Affective action: acting on the basis of emotions or passions.

The key insight: different actors follow different rationalities — and a solution must account for all of them.

Q1. Mapping rationalities

For each actor below, identify the type of rationality (or combination of types) that best describes their relationship to Devils Tower. Write a short explanation in the right-hand column.

Actor	Type(s) of rationality	Explanation
American India tribes		
Commercial guide companies		
Climbers		
The National Park Service		
Local business and tourism operators		

Q2. The hardest negotiation

Identify the two actors whose rationalities are most incompatible. Why is it difficult — or perhaps impossible — for them to find a compromise? Use Weber's concepts in your answer.

Q3. Finding a workable compromise

A rational action approach tries to find the arrangement that distributes costs most acceptably. Looking at the six alternatives, which one comes closest to this ideal? Who gains and who loses under that alternative? Is the distribution acceptable?

Q4. Strengths and limits

What does rational action theory reveal about this case? Where does this approach reach its limits — what can it not resolve, and why?

LENS 3

Relational Theory

Theory in brief

Relational theory argues that society is made of interactions, not just structures or interests. The quality of relationships — trust, mutual understanding, hostility — shapes how conflicts develop. Georg Simmel: conflict itself is a form of social interaction, not simply its breakdown. Robert Putnam introduced social capital: the value that comes from networks of trust and reciprocity. Bonding capital = strong ties within a group (e.g. among climbers, or within a tribe). Bridging capital = weaker ties that connect different groups across difference. Relational theory sees conflict as a symptom of missing or damaged bridging capital.

Q1. Mapping the relationships

Describe the relationship between each pair of actors listed below. Use these categories: strong and positive / weak and neutral / adversarial / essentially non-existent. Give a brief explanation for each.

Relationship	Quality	Brief explanation
Indians - Climbers		
Indians - NPS		
Climbers - NPS		

Guides – Climbers		
Tourists - Indians		

Q2. Moments of damage

Identify two specific moments or situations in the case where a relationship was damaged or where the absence of a relationship made the conflict worse. For each, explain the relational dynamic.

Moment 1:

Moment 2:

Q3. Building bridges

Propose two concrete steps that could build bridging capital between climbers and American Indians. These can go beyond what is mentioned in the case study. For each step, explain what kind of relationship it would create and why it might be effective.

Step 1:

Step 2:

Q4. Strengths and limits

What does relational theory see in this case that the other two approaches might miss? And what is the risk of focusing on relationships when there is a background of historical injustice?
