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

LENS 1
Conflict Theory

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.

A conflict theorist would identify white American recreational culture, represented most visibly by the rock climbers and the commercial guide companies, as the dominant group. The American Indian tribes are the subaltern, or marginalised, group.

The first piece of evidence is historical. The American Indian tribes have a centuries-old relationship with this land. In 1868, the Treaty of Fort Laramie legally recognised tribal sovereignty over the region that includes Devils Tower. In 1877, the US government took the land by force. In 1906, Devils Tower was declared a national monument — a decision made by the federal government with no tribal consultation. Rock climbing at the tower grew primarily in the twentieth century, after dispossession was already complete.

The second piece of evidence is economic. The commercial climbing guide companies hold official NPS licences. Their interests can be expressed in economic language — revenue, market access, business continuity — which translates directly into the dominant society's legal and political frameworks. The tribes' interests are spiritual and cultural. They do not translate easily into the same language. In a society that measures value economically, this is a structural disadvantage, not a personal one.

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:
The seven commercial guide companies operate under official NPS licences and generate income from the monument. The tribes receive no equivalent material recognition from the management of the site. The economic benefits of nearly half a million visitors per year flow primarily to the recreational and tourism industry. This is distributive injustice: the material gains from a site that belongs — historically and spiritually — to the tribes are distributed entirely to others.

Recognition injustice:
Several public comments in the case explicitly deny the legitimacy of the tribes' spiritual relationship with the tower. One comment states that 'there is nothing sacred about Devils Tower — it is only an extinct volcano.' Another claims that 'the sacred nature of the tower is of modern origin.' These are not simply opinions — they are acts of recognition injustice: they refuse to acknowledge a centuries-old tradition as a valid form of knowledge and a legitimate cultural practice. The management plan itself contributes to this injustice by framing the tribes' spiritual use as one recreational preference among many, equivalent in status to hiking or photography

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?

Conflict theory points toward Alternative 4 or 5 — a strong voluntary or mandatory June closure, combined with a ban on new bolts. A closure during June directly protects the most important ceremonial period for the tribes and acknowledges that their use of the site has a different historical status from recreational climbing. However, conflict theory would insist that the management plan alone is insufficient. The plan treats the conflict as a problem of resource allocation between users with equal standing. From a conflict theory perspective, this framing is itself part of the problem — it erases the colonial history of the land. What is also required is formal recognition: an official acknowledgement that Devils Tower is a sacred site, that the 1877 taking of the land violated the 1868 treaty, and that the tribes have a special claim on the governance of the monument. This could mean a permanent tribal advisory role in management decisions — a structural change, not just a seasonal restriction.

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?

Conflict theory's main strength is that it makes history visible. A 'neutral' analysis — one that treats all stakeholders as equally legitimate users — would miss the fact that the tribes' marginalisation is the result of a specific historical sequence: treaty, violation, dispossession, federal designation. Without this dimension, the conflict looks like a scheduling problem. With it, it looks like a legacy of colonisation.

Conflict theory also reveals the structural asymmetry between economic and spiritual interests — invisible in any purely procedural analysis.

Its limit is that it tends to assign roles before fully examining individual actors. Not every climber is an agent of colonial power. Conflict theory can reduce complex human situations to a moral opposition between oppressors and oppressed, which risks foreclosing the negotiation and relationship-building that might produce a durable solution. It is better at diagnosing injustice than at generating practical change.

LENS 2

Rational Theory

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	**Value rationality + Traditional action**	The sacredness of the tower is a non-negotiable commitment — it cannot be traded for other benefits. Ceremonies have also been performed for generations: acting because 'it has always been done' is central to their relationship with the site.
Commercial guide companies	**Instrumental rationality**	Their relationship is economic. They maximise access to maximise revenue. Every day of closure is a

		direct cost. They will accept restrictions only if the cost is clearly bounded and predictable.
Climbers	**Instrumental + Affective (some also Value)**	Most climbers want access to a technically excellent site — instrumental logic. Many also have deep emotional attachment to Devils Tower as a place and a community. Some describe climbing as 'spiritual', which suggests elements of value rationality too.
The Nationa Park Service	**Institutional + Value rationality**	The NPS follows its legal mandate (a form of rule-following rationality) and is committed to the mission of protecting natural and cultural heritage for future generations — a value that functions as non-negotiable.
Local business and tourism operators	**Instrumental rationality**	Their income depends on 500,000 annual visitors. Any closure that reduces visitor numbers is a direct economic cost. They share the guide companies' instrumental logic, though with less direct dependence on climbing.

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.

The most incompatible rationalities are those of the American Indian tribes (value rationality) and the commercial guide companies (instrumental rationality) and the climbers (value+instrumental).
Instrumental rationality operates in the register of negotiation: you identify what you want, you identify what the other side wants, and you look for an arrangement that distributes costs acceptably. This logic assumes that all interests are, in principle, tradeable.
Value rationality does not work this way. When the tribes say that climbing during June desecrates a sacred site, they are not making a negotiating position. They are stating a non-divisible commitment. You cannot tell someone 'you may pray here from July to May' and expect that to satisfy a spiritual violation. The sacredness of the tower during ceremonies is not proportional to the number of months it is protected. The guide companies need a tradeable solution; the tribes cannot trade. This is not a failure of goodwill — it is a structural feature of the conflict that Weber's framework makes visible.

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?

Alternative 3 or 4 — a voluntary June closure combined with regulated or banned bolting — comes closest. The cost to climbers and guides is bounded and predictable: one month in a multi-month season. The data supports this: 80% of climbs use only 23 of the 220 routes, and the

busiest climbing months are spring and early autumn. A June closure restricts the business but does not eliminate it. Gains: The tribes receive concrete protection during their most important ceremonial period. Climbers retain access for eleven months. The NPS can manage compliance within its existing authority. Losses: Guide companies lose income from June; some climbers feel the restriction sets an unwelcome precedent.

Is the distribution acceptable? From a purely instrumental perspective, possibly. But rational action theory must acknowledge its own limit here: if the tribes act with value rationality, no partial solution is truly adequate. A voluntary closure means individual climbers can still choose to climb in June, so the tribes cannot rely on the site being free. This is where rational action theory reaches the boundary of what it can resolve.

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?

Rational action theory's main strength is precision. It produces a detailed map of what each actor wants, why they want it, and how flexible they are. It identifies which actors can negotiate (guide companies, most recreational climbers) and which cannot (the tribes, on the core question of June ceremonies). This is practically useful for a decision-maker like Deborah Liggett: it shows where there is room for compromise and where there is not.

Its limit is directly related to this strength. Rational action theory assumes that all interests can eventually be traded if the right arrangement is found. This assumption fails when the conflict involves non-negotiable values. The tribes are not instrumental actors who have simply set their price very high. They are value-rational actors for whom the question of June ceremonies is not on a price scale at all.

Rational action theory also tends to treat all actors as equivalent — each with their own goals — which makes the historical asymmetry that conflict theory reveals invisible. A compromise that looks fair from a rational action perspective may still be deeply unjust in historical terms.

LENS 3

Relational Theory

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	**Adversarial**	The only interactions at the tower are experienced as mutual intrusions. Neither group knows the other as people. Their contact is structured entirely by opposition.
Indians - NPS	**Weak and ambiguous**	The NPS manages land historically taken from the tribes. The relationship is marked by institutional distance and historical distrust, though the NPS is also the body with power to recognise tribal interests.
Climbers - NPS	**Weak but regulated**	Climbers operate under NPS licences and rules. The relationship is transactional — climbers comply with regulations to access the

		site. There is no deeper connection.
Guides – Climbers	**Strong and positive**	These groups share economic interests, cultural identity, and political goals. They have dense internal networks — strong bonding capital — that make collective action easy.
Tourists - Indians	**Essentially non-existent**	Most tourists visit for recreation and have no awareness of the tribal dimension of the site. There is no shared space in which a relationship could form.

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:
The scene in which tribal elders are teaching children about respect and tradition while hearing climbers above them shouting in vulgar English is not just a moment of offence. It is a moment in which the complete absence of relational connection between the two groups becomes visible. Because the climbers have no relationship with the people below — no knowledge of who they are or what they are doing — they have no reason to moderate their behaviour. And because the elders have no relationship with the climbers, they cannot appeal to them as people. The absence of bridging capital turns a minor practical conflict (two groups in the same space) into a profound relational injury.

Moment 2:
The NPS consultation process — collecting written comments through a formal administrative procedure — reproduced the relational asymmetry rather than reducing it. Writing formal letters of comment is a cultural practice that belongs primarily to the dominant society. Climbing organisations submitted detailed, technically sophisticated responses. The tribal voices in the record are fewer and shorter — not because the tribes care less, but because the consultation process favoured groups with stronger connections to bureaucratic and legal culture. A process designed to build legitimacy actually damaged the NPS–tribes relationship by signalling that the institution's default mode of listening excluded them.

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:
Organised joint visits to Devils Tower, facilitated by the NPS, in which tribal members and experienced climbers meet in a structured but informal setting to talk about their respective relationships to the site. The goal is explicitly not negotiation — it is encounter. Each group needs to see the other as people with genuine histories and legitimate commitments before any productive negotiation is possible. This step creates the most basic form of bridging capital: personal recognition across difference. It interrupts the condition of mutual invisibility that sustains the adversarial relationship.

Step 2:
A permanent interpretive programme at the monument — developed and delivered jointly by tribal representatives and NPS rangers — that presents both the geological and the cultural-spiritual history of the tower to all visitors, including climbers. Currently, climbers arrive knowing Devils Tower as a climbing site. This programme would change the context in which they encounter it: they would arrive already knowing it is a living sacred site with a specific colonial history. Over time, this changes not just knowledge but relationship — climbers would no longer be strangers to the tribal dimension of the place.

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?

Relational theory sees what neither conflict theory nor rational action theory can fully account for: the conflict is also sustained by ignorance. The climbers and the tribes do not know each other. Any management decision imposed from above — even a just one — will be experienced as external constraint rather than legitimate governance, because the relational conditions for accepting it as legitimate have not been built. A policy change without a relational change is fragile.
The risk of the relational approach in this context is real. When there is a background of historical injustice — dispossession, treaty violation, cultural erasure — asking the marginalised group to invest in relationship-building can become another burden placed on those who have already suffered most. The invitation to 'build bridges' can imply that both sides are equally responsible for the gap, which erases the history of how the gap was created. Relational theory works best when it operates alongside conflict theory's insistence on historical recognition — not as a substitute for it.