In Praise of Thrasymachus?

Although Ralf Dahrendorf has abandoned his early interest and research in the classics, he has returned to his beginnings in some of his studies in the theory of society. In several papers he has used Plato's political thought as a foil for his contention that his own conflict theory of society is a superior mode of explanation than the equilibrium theory of contemporary theorists, notably Parsons.¹ My concern here is not to debate the respective merits of the two theories of conflict and equilibrium per se, but to analyze and evaluate their earlier manifestation in the guise of the theories put forward by Thrasymachus and Socrates-Plato in the Republic.² Thrasymachus in Dahrendorf's eyes is the forerunner of the conflict theory of society and Socrates the equilibrium theory. My focus, here, then will be with a discussion of the implications for the theory of society that Dahrendorf makes from his study of Thrasymachus and Socrates (I use Socrates and Plato interchangeably) rather than with the intricacies of the attack and defense of Thrasymachus' definition of justice that are familiar to scholars.

Like Glaucon, but for other reasons, Dahrendorf wants to make a better case for Thrasymachus' contention that justice is the interest of the stronger. In his restatement of Thrasymachus' position, Dahrendorf presents the sophist's theory as a way of dealing with "change, conflict, and the interplay of power and resistance."³ He sees a direct line from Thrasymachus through Hobbes to our own democratic pluralism. Plato's ideal state, he finds in contrast, exemplifies the equilibrium, absence of change, conformity, and intolerance which to him foreshadows Rousseau's general will and what some have called the democratic totalitarianism it spawned.⁴ I want here to consider Dahrendorf's argument that the Thrasymachean theory offers a better explanation than the Socratic of three important problems, the basis of society, the nature of social change, and the
nature and objects of political theory.

The Basis of Society

According to Dahrendorf, the basis for society is the existence of positions of authority whose holders wield power over their fellows; in Thrasymachus' pithy phrase, "justice is the interest of the stronger." Power for Dahrendorf is a "central notion." Unequally divided between the rulers and ruled it is a "lasting source of friction" and is the cause of conflict. Laws are set out for the interest of the rulers and are enforced by the fear of sanctions. Legitimacy for Thrasymachus and Dahrendorf is the same as the effectiveness of the power disposed by the rulers. Such legitimacy is always "precarious" because it depends on the unstable superiority of power of the rulers over the resistance of the ruled. Society in the Dahrendorfen-Thrasymachean theory is held together not by consensus among the members of society, but through fear of punishment by a superior force--the rulers, whether as Thrasymachus says, the society be a democracy, aristocracy, monarchy etc. A society based on conflict requires a constraint theory of obedience to law. Such a society does not have values in any ordinary sense but norms. These differ from values in "being associated with sanctions and thus having a binding force." Concludes Dahrendorf, in the Thrasymachean inspired "conflict" society, power wielded by the rulers creates and maintains norms imposed by force or the threat of force on unwilling subjects too weak to resist. The substance of these norms is the interest of the powerful. Social conflict is an undeniable fact.

In contrast, contends Dahrendorf, the equilibrium theory as it appears in Plato is a "freakish accident." Little is gained, he feels, by making consensus or equilibrium the basis of society. Although Dahrendorf represents consensus as Rousseau's general will, he also intends it to apply to the Platonic ideal state. Consensus is apparent in the ideal state as temperance, the willing agreement between rulers and ruled as to who should rule and who should be ruled. This consensus also implies agreement as to the values of the ideal