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Conflict theorizing originated in Europe in the works of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Georg Simmel. In its more modern guise, conflict theory is an American invention, despite the fact that its reemergence in the mid-twentieth century was inspired by European and European-origin critics of structural functionalism. Early criticisms of functionalism came from David Lockwood and Ralf Dahrendorf, who argued that functional theory, especially the version practiced by Talcott Parsons, presented an overly integrated view of social organization that could not account for conflict and change. This critique was buttressed by immigrant critical theorists and, curiously, by Lewis Coser, another European immigrant, who argued that both conflict and functional theories were too extreme, requiring an assessment of the functions of conflict. These criticisms became ritualistic attacks on functionalism as American academia emerged from the repression of Marxist (communist-sounding) thought during the McCarthy era in the 1950s and as the student unrest of the 1960s accelerated during the course of the Vietnam War. Functionalism was seen as ideologically conservative and as providing justification for the status quo. All of these criticisms were overdrawn, and most did not lead to new theorizing but, instead, caused the collapse of functional theorizing, especially the action theory of Talcott Parsons.

Yet the critique of functionalism did legitimate a revival of the European conflict tradition in the United States; and by the mid-1970s, Marx's and Weber's approaches were being recast into modern conflict theory, with occasional use of Simmel's ideas. Three lines of conflict theorizing emerged in America, two devoted to reviving Marx and Weber (again, with Simmelian elements) and a third combining elements of both Marx and Weber. These can be labeled, for convenience, *neo-Marxist*, *neo-Weberian*, and *historical-comparative* conflict theory. Alongside these general theories were more specific theories associated with social movements and identity politics (e.g., ethnicity and gender). Critical theorizing, however, did not enjoy the same revival in America, remaining predominately a European enterprise or being incorporated into the revival of Marxian conflict theory.

Neo-Marxian Conflict Theorizing

Within the United States, the Marxian tradition was revived in a number of ways. All variants of this approach emphasized that patterns of inequality generate inherent conflicts of interest that lead subordinates to become aware of their interest in changing the system of stratification through mobilization for conflict.

Positivistic Marxism

The most influential approach was by Ralf Dahrendorf (1959), a European who emphasized Marx's dialectic and blended this imagery with useful elements from both Weber and Simmel. In essence, Dahrendorf tried to abstract above Marx's empirical categories (e.g., proletarians, bourgeoisie) so that they could apply to any pattern of social organization revealing a system of authority, which he labeled an *imperative coordinated association*, or an ICA. The task then became one of specifying the conditions under which subordinates in an ICA became aware of their interests in changing the distribution of authority and, then, in mobilizing to pursue conflict of varying degrees of intensity (emotional involvement) and violence. Dahrendorf's approach was decidedly positivistic in that he generated propositions specifying the conditions under which awareness of interests, intensity, and violence would vary. In addressing the questions of intensity and violence, Dahrendorf borrowed from Simmel's and Weber's respective critiques of Marx, arguing (against Marx) that the more subordinates are aware of

their interests and organized to pursue conflict, the less intense and violent is the conflict with superordinates in an ICA; conversely, the less clearly articulated are the interests of subordinates and the less coherent their organization to pursue conflict, the more violent is conflict when it erupts, especially if (1) rates of upward mobility for subordinates are low, (2) authority is highly correlated with the distribution of other valued resources, and (3) deprivations among subordinates escalate suddenly. A similar effort to use Weber's and Simmel's critique of Marx was performed by the American theorist Jonathan Turner (1975). None of these more positivistic theories was accepted by die-hard Marxists because they underemphasize the evaluative and emancipatory thrust of Marx's ideas.

Analytical Marxism

Eric Olin Wright (1997) is perhaps the most significant American theorist to sustain Marx's evaluation of stratification systems, while trying to take account of the problems that Marx's analysis presents. Wright has, over the last four decades, developed a kind of analytical Marxism that, unlike critical Marxism, does not distrust science. Instead, Wright's Marxism tries to take account of three vexing problems of postindustrial societies: (1) the increasing number of middle social classes (an empirical fact that goes against Marx's prediction of polarization of populations in capitalist societies into only the bourgeoisie and proletariat), (2) the diffusion of ownership with joint stock companies (and the corresponding separation of management from ownership), and (3) the increasing number of individuals employed by government (a nonprofit enterprise). At the same time, Wright wants to retain Marx's idea of exploitation whereby superordinates gain wealth from the surplus value of labor.

The basic analytical scheme emphasizes that the existing class system limits both class formation and class struggle, while class struggle will transform class structure and class formation. For Wright, neo-Marxian theory needs to specify the mechanisms generating class formation and class struggle, within the limitations imposed by the existing class structure. Class formation and struggle are influenced by the *material interests* of actors, or their total package of income from both economic activity and welfare; the *lived experiences* of individuals as dictated by their class location, as determined by their jobs in the highly differentiated economies of capitalist systems; and the *collective capacities* of individuals that become problematic because of occupational differentiation and proliferation of middle classes. Thus, the key forces of class analysis do not line up as neatly as they do in Marxian theory, especially when middle-class families can have contradictory class locations (and hence varying material interests and lived experiences that work against mobilization for conflict) and when government employs a high proportion of the workforce. Wright has posited a number of concepts to take account of these new complexities, but he has not fully been able to sustain the emphasis on exploitation, whether by business or government. Indeed, because individuals have diverse class locations and lived experiences, they are less likely to use their collective capacities to engage in class struggle.

As the problems of reconciling Marxian categories to modern realities have become evident, an alternative form of Marxian analysis emerged in the 1970s in American sociology. This approach, in essence, shifted the unit of analysis from the nation-state to systems of relations among nations. Immanuel Wallerstein's (1974) work was the most influential, although not the first to adopt this form of Marxian analysis. Wallerstein divided history into the formation of world empires through military activities and world economy composed of core states of approximately equal military power; a periphery of weak states whose cheap labor and natural resources could be extracted through exploitive trade arrangements; and a few semiperipheral states standing between the core and periphery (whether as minor nations in the core area or

as leading nations in poor regions). In many ways, the distinction between the core and periphery is similar to Marx's view of the bourgeoisie and proletariat, and the underlying evaluative argument is much the same: As capitalism goes global, the contradictions of capitalism will be exposed as competition between core states increases and as subordinate states resist exploitation, leading to the final collapse of capitalism and the emergence of a socialist alternative. Whatever the merits of the endgame, world-systems analysis has proven to be fertile new territory for Marxian theory. Much of the analysis is highly technical, revolving around cyclical tendencies of world economies (e.g., Kondratieff waves, Juglar cycles, and hegemonic sequences), while other approaches have emphasized the nature of exploitation of poor nations by their dependency on rich countries for technology and capital. Still other approaches have viewed the world system as a kind of dynamic machine whose operation constrains the internal dynamics of societies.

In sum, then, Marx's view of the social universe as rife with conflicts of interests between those who gain wealth at the expense of others persists in theoretical sociology at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The emancipatory thrust of Marx's theory is also retained in most neo-Marxian schemes, particularly as the more positivistic variants have fallen into obscurity or been incorporated into mainstream theorizing, thereby losing their distinctiveness.

Neo-Weberian Conflict Theorizing

Max Weber's implicit critique of Marx appears not only within the more positivistic neo-Marxian camp but also in theoretical approaches more directly in tune with Weber's sociology. Part of Weber's conflict theory reappears in historical-comparative analysis, to be examined below, but in the 1970s, Randall Collins (1975) developed a general theory of social processes that had Weber's ideas on conflict at its core. Although Collins blended his approach with ideas from microsocial theories and from Émile Durkheim, the basic view of social organization is Weberian. Social reality unfolds at the microlevel through interaction rituals that when chained together, produce stratification systems and class cultures as well as organizational systems, which, in turn, generate more macrostructures that can range from the state and economy to the dynamics of geopolitical systems.

At any level of social reality, there is always inequality in the distribution of material, symbolic, and political resources, with the potential for conflict always present between individuals engaged in face-to-face interaction, within organizations, between classes and class cultures, and between societies. Although Collins used the label of *conflict sociology* for his approach, it is a much more general theory of how macrostructures are built from microlevel encounters. At the microlevel, Collins portrays individuals as seeking to enhance their cultural capital and emotional energy by using their resources to advantage and, if they do not possess resources, to limit their expenditure of cultural capital and emotion in rituals where they are at a resource disadvantage. At the mesolevel of social organization, Collins portrays organizations as control systems, with those having coercive, symbolic, and material resources using their advantage to gain conformity from those who resist these efforts. Early analysis of stratification systems emphasized variations in class cultures, but in more recent work, Collins has challenged the layered view of class hierarchy so prevalent in Marxian sociology. For if one looks at what actually occurs in public spaces, the deference and demeanor patterns typical of clear hierarchies have broken down in modern societies, with those in less advantaged resource positions controlling public and interpersonal space vis-à-vis those who occupy resource-advantaged positions. At the macrolevel, Collins has examined conflict within a society in terms of the ability of state to regulate internal activities, with this capacity resting, in turn, on the level of production in the economy and the level of control by

the state of coercive, symbolic, and material resources.

Turning to geopolitics, Collins (1986) has borrowed from Weber's analysis and developed a theory that seeks to explain how empires expand, and when they are likely to collapse. Initial advantages in economic resources, military technology, and geography (marchland advantage) allow a state to expand through military conquest, but as the marchland advantage is lost (with ever-more enemies on its expanding borders) as resources are spent to control territory, as logistical loads of moving resources about the territory increase, as hostile neighbors copy the military technologies of an expanding empire, and as other powerful empires are threatened, the advantages that allowed an empire to expand are also lost, thereby creating conditions that will lead to its collapse.

Comparative-Historical Conflict Theory

Theories of conflict within the comparative-historical tradition emphasize two related sets of factors. One set of factors is the conditions that lead subordinate masses to mobilize ideologically, politically, and organizationally to pursue conflict against the state and elites who dominate them. The second set of factors is the forces that lead to the breakdown in the state's power and hence its capacity to control a population. The first factor has a Marxian emphasis, with Weberian refinement, whereas the second is more in line with Weber's concerns about the capacity of the state to dominate a population. Several prominent theorists have worked on specific questions and sets of historical data, but all have been concerned with the likelihood that a revolution will occur. Since revolutions have been rather rare historically, theorists have tended to work with the same societies in which violent overthrow of the state has occurred. And though each theory tends to be somewhat embedded within the specific historical time frames, all of these theories contain implicit theoretical statements that have general applicability to all societies.

More Marxian than Weberian Approaches

Moore's Theory of Dictatorship and Democracy. One of the earliest contemporary theories in America is Barrington Moore's (1966) comparative study of the conditions producing dictatorships or democracies, with the implicit assumption that dictatorships would be more likely to generate conflict-producing tensions. If we abstract above the specific historical details, Moore can be seen as borrowing from Marx in emphasizing that the masses will become mobilized to pursue conflict when they constitute a coherent whole in terms of their structural location, experiences, and routines; when they experience deprivations collectively; when they can avoid competition with each other over resources; when traditional connections between subordinates and superordinates are weakening; and when subordinates perceive that superordinates are exploiting them.

Paige's Theory of Agrarian Revolution. Jeffrey Paige's (1975) work on revolts in agrarian societies was one of the first to adapt Marx's ideas to mass mobilizations of peasants in agrarian societies. Arguing that Marx's ideas are more relevant to agrarian than industrial societies, he sought to develop a series of generalizations about conflict between cultivators (agricultural workers) and noncultivators (owners/managers/elites). For Paige, economic exploitation alone will not lead to mass mobilization; rather, revolutionary conflict will occur when economic conflict moves into the political arena. Like Marx, Paige posits a number of conditions that translate the inherent conflict of interest between cultivators and noncultivators into mass mobilization by cultivators: one is cultivators' receptiveness to radical ideologies,

which increases when ties to the land are tenuous and unstable, and decreases when cultivators live on the edge, have few work alternatives, and reside in traditional/paternalistic communities. Another is collective solidarity, which increases when workers have high interdependence and when workers have had past success in collective action. Whether or not mobilization by cultivators will lead to collective action by the mass of workers depends upon the actions of noncultivators. If noncultivators do not themselves possess great economic advantages and, as a consequence, enlist actors in the state to engage in repressive control, then mass mobilization of workers is more likely. Conversely, if noncultivators have resources, can shift to capital-intensive processing of crops (i.e., mechanization), and can afford to hire free labor on open markets, they can engage in less repressive control and force cultivators to engage in collective negotiation.

More Weberian than Marxian Theories

Tilly's Resource Mobilization Theory. Resource mobilization theory has been developed outside comparative historical sociology, but one of its creators, Charles Tilly (1978), has used this approach to analyze historical cases. Tilly distinguishes between a revolutionary situation punctuated by demonstrations, riots, social movements, civil wars, and the like against the state, and revolutionary outcomes where there is a real transfer of state power. The first part of his theory emphasizes the conditions that produce a revolutionary situation: multiple contenders to state power, large or elite segments of the population willing to support contenders to power, and inability and unwillingness of the state to use repressive control. A revolutionary outcome decreases when the state can mobilize coercive resources (with a standing army not preoccupied with geopolitical conflict), when it can make strategic but not too costly concessions to potential contenders so as to increase symbolic legitimacy for the state, and when the state is strong fiscally so that it can afford to support its coercive forces while spending resources to make key concessions.

Skocpol's Theory of States and Social Revolutions. Building upon both Moore's and Tilly's theories, with Weber's emphasis on the state's geopolitical situation, Theda Skocpol (1979) has developed an implicit theory of revolutionary conflict. For revolution to occur, the masses must be capable of mobilizing, and the likelihood of such mobilization increases with their ability to generate solidarity, to avoid direct supervision by superordinates, to perform crucial economic activities for superordinates, and to have organizational resources. This mobilization, Skocpol argues, will lead to full-scale and successful social revolution when the central coercive apparatus of the state is weak, when the state experiences a fiscal crisis, when the state's power relative to dominant sectors of the society is declining, and when the state loses a war and its place in the geopolitical system, thereby undermining further its symbolic and coercive bases of power.

Goldstone's Theory of State Breakdown. Jack Goldstone (1991) adds a new variable to these historical-comparative theories of revolutions in agrarian societies: population growth. There is a lag time between initial population growth and the effects of this growth on political stability. Eventually, the economy cannot meet the needs of the growing population, nor can it provide the state sufficient resources for administration, coercive control, and patronage to elites and non-elites. Non-elites become mobilized to pursue conflict when demand for goods exceeds the capacity of the economy to produce them, when rapid inflation ensues as demand outstrips supply, and when rural misery leads to the immigration of the young to urban areas, where they become concentrated and more likely to mobilize. State breakdown is also related to elite mobilization against the state; and this source of mobilization increases as population growth causes price inflation that forces traditional landholding elites to seek patronage from

the state in order to prevent their downward mobility. At the same time, upwardly mobile non-elites benefiting from price inflation in commerce seek patronage from the state as confirmation of their new status as potential elites. State breakdown becomes ever more likely as fiscal crises increase as a result of poor taxation formulas, patronage paid to elites, and military adventurism. And these forces together—mass mobilization, elite mobilization, and fiscal crisis—all act in concert to cause a state breakdown.

Does Conflict Theory Still Exist?

In many ways, conflict theory is an American invention that reflected a particular time: the growing dissatisfaction with functional theory, the repression of all Marxian (communist) ideas in the 1950s, the inability of existing theories (e.g., symbolic interactionism) to provide a viable alternative to functional theory, and the growing unrest embodied in first the student movement and then the anti-Vietnam War movement. In Europe, sociologists and public intellectuals had engaged in conflict-oriented analysis for many decades; and so, there was little need to proclaim a conflict theory that would compensate for past theoretical sins. By the time functionalism had receded in prominence in the 1970s, conflict theory was already waning, although its merger into the theoretical mainstream was not so evident until the final decade of the twentieth century. Today, the topics emphasized by the conflict theories of the 1960s and 1970s are so thoroughly incorporated into the theoretical canon that they need not be highlighted by the term *conflict theory*. Few sociologists would dispute the centrality to sociological theory of inequality in the distribution of resources (material, political, symbolic) and the tensions that such inequality systematically generates in human groupings. Indeed, a good portion of general theory in many different traditions takes this core idea as its starting point. Conflict theory, therefore, is now so mainstream that it no longer needs to be labeled as distinctive.

What, then, can we take from the several decades of relative dominance of a conflict approach to understanding the social order? First, conflict theory did balance the tendency of functional theory to overemphasize integration, although the criticism was always overdrawn and often worked to push out of the canon some of the important ideas of functional theorizing that, perhaps, will have to be rediscovered in the future. Second, conflict theory encouraged the analysis of conflict dynamics in many substantive specialties of sociology, such as family, gender, education, organizations, law, culture, and communities, and it reinvigorated other areas, such as collective behavior, social movements, ethnic relations, historical sociology, stratification, and political sociology. Third, it was one of the moving forces behind new areas of sociological inquiry, such as world-systems analysis and the study of globalization. And perhaps most significantly, it left behind a series of theoretical principles that can be used in almost any context where inequalities are evident.

What are these principles? They can be found in the explicit statements of the positivistic forms of conflict theory, or they can be extracted from more discursive approaches that do not enumerate explicit propositions. These propositions highlighted the conditions under which subordinates in a system of inequality become mobilized to pursue conflict as well as the conditions that increase or decrease the intensity and violence of the conflict. Conflict theory did less well in articulating the conditions that generate inequality per se, although some conflict-oriented theorists did make an effort to specify these conditions beyond what Marx had sought to do in his analysis of capitalism (Turner 1984).

One strength of conflict theory, then, resides in specifying the conditions under which subordinates become mobilized to pursue conflict. Subordinates are more likely to mobilize

when inequality is high, when upward mobility is low, when subordinates are in ecological propinquity and can communicate their grievances to each other, when relative deprivation (and the emotions that this generates) is experienced collectively, when superordinates are not in a position or do not have the resources to monitor and control the routines of subordinates, when subordinates possess organizational, political, material, and symbolic (ideological) resources, when leadership among subordinates can emerge, and when superordinates are unable to repress or co-opt subordinates and cannot institutionalize conflict through law. Obviously, there are more factors involved, but these are the ones that emerged from conflict sociology in America during the middle decades of the twentieth century.

A second area of strength in conflict theory is its ability to specify the conditions under which the emotional involvement and the potential violence to conflict will increase. Emotions are aroused when deprivations escalate suddenly and can be experienced collectively, whereas violence increases when subordinates have begun to mobilize (ideologically, organizationally, and politically) but not to the degree that their goals and means to achieve these goals are clearly articulated.

A third area of strength in conflict theory is specification of the conditions that increase the likelihood of successful collective mobilization. Here, the capacities of superordinates to mobilize become critical. If superordinates are well organized and ideologically unified while possessing material and coercive resources, the likelihood of success in changing the distribution of power and other resources is reduced. If superordinates are highly dependent upon the outputs of subordinates for their well-being and cannot get these outputs from alternative sources, then superordinates will be more likely to negotiate with subordinates, thereby allowing the latter to realize some of their goals. These negotiations will be more successful if subordinates are sufficiently organized to have clear goals that can be subject to negotiation. And if a system of law exists to mediate and enforce agreements, then subordinates are likely to be at least partially successful in realizing their goals.

Again, various theories add refinements to these generalizations, but one point should be emphasized in closing: Conflict theories reveal a bias toward how successful or unsuccessful subordinates will be in mobilizing. When the theories are formally stated, this bias becomes immediately evident because the theories address the conditions under which subordinates will mobilize and be successful in forcing superordinates to redistribute valued resources. One could phrase the matter differently: Under what conditions can superordinates hang on to their privilege and prevent mobilization by superordinates? But this question would go against the ideological bias of the approach as it was initially inspired by Marx. Indeed, conflict theory implicitly adopts Marx's emancipatory goals, even in its more positivistic variants, because it emphasizes what it takes for subordinates to mobilize and be successful. Nonetheless, despite the obvious bias, conflict theorizing dramatically shifted the focus of theoretical sociology toward problems of inequality and conflict.

- conflict theory
- comparative and historical theory
- conflict
- world systems theory
- functionalism
- class struggle
- elites

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See also

- [Globalization](#)
- [Historical and Comparative Theory](#)
- [Historical Materialism](#)
- [Power](#)
- [Revolution](#)
- [Social Class](#)
- [Social Movement Theory](#)
- [State](#)
- [Structural Functionalism](#)
- [World-Systems Theory](#)

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