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no single theory provides a generally accepted and comprehensive explanation for the complexity of ethnic group formation or the persistence of racial conflict in contemporary society.

As a result of this analytical discord, it is hardly surprising that the proposed solutions to racial and ethnic conflict are equally diverse. Some see these divisions as fundamental to social life and that the search for a final solution to such conflicts is a never-ending task that can be as potentially dangerous as the problem itself. Others propose that it is better to channel and institutionalize diversity in ways that make it less destructive and thereby reduce its enormous potential for violence and bloodshed. Creating cross-cutting cleavages, blurring the boundaries of race and class, decentralizing political power in different forms of federal structures that protect the interest of specific ethnic and racial groups, and trying to ensure that majority rule also respects minority rights are just some of the techniques of social engineering that have been deployed to take the sting out of multi-ethnic political units. Still others claim that the celebration of ethnicity and racial identity will bring about changes in attitudes and behavior that mitigate the dangerous polarization of groups along these types of boundaries. The persistence of ethnic and racial conflicts suggests that the diversity of theoretical interpretations is matched by the range of policy strategies, and that the continuation of ethnic and racial conflicts is likely to be an enduring feature of most societies for the foreseeable future.

SEE ALSO: Burundi and Rwanda (Hutu, Tutsi); Ethnic Cleansing; Genocide; Race; Race (Racism); Racial Hierarchy; Truth and Reconciliation Commissions

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## conflict theory

Stephen K. Sanderson

The term "conflict theory" came into wide use in sociology during the 1960s, when it was seen as an alternative to and rival of functionalism. Initially, the term seemed merely to identify a more politically neutral Marxian perspective, but for some it meant something much broader. The strongest contemporary advocate of conflict theory is Randall Collins. For him, conflict theory includes not only Marx and the Marxists, but also Weber and a number of other social theorists extending back to earlier times. He sees as early forerunners of modern conflict theory such thinkers as Machiavelli and Pareto. Collins (1974, 1975) has done more than any sociologist to develop a synthesized conflict theory that owes more to Weber than to any other sociologist. Sociologists have often regarded Lewis Coser's *The Functions of Social Conflict* (1956) as a version of conflict theory, but it is more a functionalist analysis of the role of conflict in social life than a use of conflict propositions to explain various social phenomena.

Conflict theory presupposes the following: (1) conflict or struggle between individuals and groups who have opposing interests or who are competing for scarce resources is the essence of social life; (2) competition and conflict occur over many types of resources in many settings, but power and economic resources are the principal sources of conflict and competition; (3) conflict and struggle typically result in some individuals and groups dominating and controlling others, and patterns of domination and subordination tend to be self-perpetuating; (4) dominant social groups have a disproportionate influence on the allocation of resources and on the structure of society.

Marxian conflict theory is the more prominent of two major lines of work. For Marxists,

social class is the source of conflict in all societies above the level of primitive egalitarian communities. Class conflict – between masters and slaves or landlords and peasants, for example – pervades history and is the engine of historical change. Marxists have focused most of their attention, though, on the class structure of modern capitalist society. The most prominent feature of capitalist society is the class struggle between capitalists and workers. Marx assumed, and nearly all later Marxists have assumed as well, that to understand the structure, functioning, and evolution of capitalist society you had to start from the fact that capitalists have as their main objective maximizing profits and accumulating capital. They do this by exploiting the working class, i.e., by paying them wages that are less than the full value of the goods they produce. Workers are motivated to resist capitalist exploitation as much as they can, and thus there is an inherent antagonism between capitalists and workers. This class struggle is the foundation of capitalism and the root cause of all other forms of struggle or conflict within capitalism.

In the 1970s some sociologists began to rethink the traditional interpretation of Weber handed down by Talcott Parsons, viewing Weber as offering a kind of conflict theory that was similar to Marxian theory in certain ways, but different in crucial respects (Cohen et al. 1975; Collins 1975, 1986). Collins developed this idea most thoroughly. He argued that Weber was a complex and multidimensional thinker who later in life evolved into a conflict theorist. Like Marx, Weber emphasized the role of conflict, struggle, and discord in social life, viewing them as pervasive features of society and the keys to understanding it.

There are certain crucial differences in the conflict theories of Marx and Weber, and in the conflict theories of their various followers. Four crucial differences can be emphasized:

- *Class and other struggles.* For Marxian theory, class struggle is most fundamental and underlies all other forms. Political, ethnic, religious, and ideological conflicts not only manifest the predominant form of class conflict and the nature of the dominant class, but also in essence would not exist at all were class conflict to be eradicated.

Weberians view this position as excessively “class reductionist.” They view class struggle as important in many societies, but often not as the most important form of struggle or as the basis for other forms of struggle. For contemporary Weberian conflict theorists, political, ethnic, and religious struggles are often most important and thus cannot be explained simply by relating them to class struggle. The neo-Weberian theorist Frank Parkin (1979), for example, regards racial conflict as the most crucial type in South African society.

- *Inevitability of conflict, domination, and inequality.* Marxists have held that the capitalist class struggle can be eradicated and, along with it, the other major forms of social conflict that flow from it. Weberians, on the other hand, tend to view at least some degree of conflict as permanent and ineradicable. Attempts to eliminate certain types of conflict are likely to be only partially successful. If more fully successful, then they may very well intensify or create other forms of conflict. Weber, for example, famously argued that attempts to replace capitalism with socialism would intensify the power of the state, and thus would increase the conflict between the state and the citizenry. Weber was a kind of cynical realist (Collins 1986) who saw social life as a continual process of individuals maneuvering for power and control over situations and over each other.
- *Nature and role of the state.* Marx himself, and the majority of Marxists, have tended to view the state as the political agent of the ruling class, although more recently some Marxists have conceded a certain autonomy to state action. Weberians tend to see this type of class reductionism as a great oversimplification. The state is often tied to the ruling class and may do its bidding, but the state has its own interests to pursue, such as maintaining order, enhancing its status, and competing with other states (Collins 1975; Parkin 1979; Skocpol 1979). The autonomous role of states, and the importance of the international states system and geopolitics, are major emphases in Weberian conflict theory but receive little in Marxism.

- *Bureaucratic and organizational power struggles.* Bureaucratic organization was a major focus in Weber's work but almost totally absent from Marx's. For Weber, the alienating consequences of the modern division of labor were produced more by bureaucratic forms of organization than by who owned the means of production. Not only did these forms of organization play a major role in shaping modern social life, but they were also themselves the sites of major power struggles.

Marx's view of the state was that it was "the executive committee of the ruling class." In capitalist society, the main role of the state is to protect the position of the capitalist class and help it to achieve its economic objectives. In the view of such modern Marxists as Miliband (1977) and Szymanski (1978), the modern state in capitalist societies is a *capitalist state*. The state may "govern," but the capitalist class "rules." The state does three primary things to assist the capitalist class. It plays a legitimization role, by which it attempts to promote among the population a consensus regarding the basic moral soundness and appropriateness of capitalism as an economic system. It also engages in repression by preventing people from taking actions that would be harmful to the capitalist class. Finally, it has an accumulation function whereby it enacts and promotes numerous policies, laws, and strategies to aid the capitalist class in its quest for maximizing profits and accumulating capital.

Marxists have also formulated theories of racial antagonism. The so-called orthodox Marxian theory of racial antagonism views it as an attempt to placate the working class and reduce the price of their labor (Reich 1977). Capitalists can take advantage of racial diversity by promoting racial tension among members of the working class, preventing it from achieving its full organizational potential and thus its ability to push for higher wages. Edna Bonacich (1972) has developed an alternative Marxian theory called the *split labor market theory*. This is a more complex and subtle theory that views racial antagonism emerging from a conflict between three groups: capitalists, higher-paid labor, and cheaper labor. When there is a split in the labor market between higher-paid and

cheaper labor, capitalists will try to replace the former with the latter as much as possible. If the split in the labor market corresponds to racial divisions, then capitalists may in essence be trying to replace one racial group with another. Higher-paid labor will try to neutralize the threat from cheaper labor by excluding it through racial considerations.

Frank Parkin (1979) has developed a neo-Weberian approach to stratification in modern societies that contrasts sharply with Marxist theory. Parkin accepts the reality of class domination, but adds to it other important forms in his *theory of social closure*. Social closure exists in all societies and involves efforts of individuals to monopolize various resources in order to achieve or maintain a privileged social position. Attempts at closure occur along many lines, including class, gender, race and ethnicity, religion, and educational credentials, and these are to a large extent independent of one another. Closure based on ownership of the means of production is simply one form of closure among several. Parkin's argument is that there are numerous forms of inequality that have little or nothing to do with ownership, and thus they cannot be explained in Marxian terms. In addition to the non-class forms of inequality mentioned above, these include the high incomes and status positions of learned professionals, and the persisting inequalities in the old Soviet Union despite the eradication of all major forms of private property.

Theda Skocpol's (1979, 1994) Weberian work on social revolutions illustrates one of the major differences between Marxian and Weberian conflict theory. She has criticized Marxian theories of revolution for emphasizing class dynamics at the expense of the state, a classical Weberian theme. She asserts that revolutions are not made by revolutionaries, class-based or otherwise, but result from what is happening at the level of the state. All social revolutions have occurred in societies in which the peasantry is the largest social class; however, in her view peasants are almost always discontented and potentially rebellious. Peasant discontent therefore cannot explain why, when, or where revolutions occur. Skocpol argues that revolutions occur when the state is vulnerable to a revolutionary overthrow. Most of the time the state is strong enough to put down

revolutionary action, but in certain circumstances it is unable to do so. In the case of the French Revolution, for example, it was a state fiscal crisis, brought on by the draining effects of war, that led to the demise of the old regime. In the case of more recent revolutions, such as the Iranian Revolution of 1979, it was the existence of a regime so brutally repressive of major social groups that it led to a level of popular resistance to the Shah's regime that was strong enough to overcome it.

Conflict theory is alive and well in modern sociology and many sociologists work within that framework, broadly conceived (Lord & Sanderson 1999). It has contributed much to sociological understanding and is being extended in new ways through linkage with perspectives normally thought far removed from it, such as sociobiology (Sanderson 2001) and Durkheimian social theory (Collins 2004).

SEE ALSO: Class Conflict; Conflict Theory and Crime and Delinquency; Critical Theory/Frankfurt School; Dependency and World-Systems Theories; Marx, Karl; Stratification: Functional and Conflict Theories; Stratification and Inequality, Theories of; Weber, Max

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## conflict theory and crime and delinquency

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Much of the sociological and criminological mainstream assumes that society is organized around and characterized by consensus; however, conflict theorists place the process of discord at the center of cultural, institutional, and organizational dynamics. While a number of theoretical variations have emerged from within the general conflict tradition, they share a few basic assumptions. First, conflict theorists assume that in more complex, industrialized societies, values and interests diverge at certain points of social difference. Second, conflict theorists recognize that power and resources are differentially distributed. Consequently, some social groups are in a better position than others to have their own values and interests adopted in a formal capacity and subsequently embedded in the policies and practices of social institutions. Thus, matters of social and cultural significance are points of division and deep struggle rather than points of agreement and commonly shared interest.

Within criminology, the adoption of conflict theory's basic assumptions has led to alternative ways by which to comprehend criminality, lawmaking, and law enforcement. Conflict theorists explain the presence of crime and the enactment of laws in much the same way as they account for other aspects of social life. In