

Classical Sociology Theory
Lecture 57
Conflict Theory

Welcome back to the class and in this class, we will have some discussion about conflict theory. And again, it is one among the three theoretical orientations of modern sociological theories. As we discussed in the previous class, structural functionalism, conflict theory and interactionism are widely considered as the three major streams of sociological theorizations of modern sociological theory.

The kinds of theories emerged after 1930s and that was relevant up to 1980s and though we say that these theoretical traditions are relevant, after 80s you will see a kind of a splintering of these theoretical traditions and addition of a lot more traditions and a lot of orientations, theoretical arguments coming into picture.

Why I decided to devote three sessions to each of these traditions is basically to give you a very broad overview and I know it is a very extremely superficial and sketchy elaboration, I am not able to go into any of the thinkers in a detailed manner, I am not able to discuss anything more substantive, but I only would be able to give you a very broad overview of the transformation of the trajectory of these theoretical traditions and to introduce you these scholars. So, once you want to study modern sociological theories it might be helpful for you.

That is the only intention otherwise these discussions what we had yesterday about the structure functionalism and today's discussion on conflict theory and the next class is discussion on interactionism theory are all going to be extremely sketchy and very superficial.

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- Better equipped to explain social change and transformations

The following central assumptions

1. People have several interests; many of them are in conflict with others. Most importantly emerging from material conditions.
2. Power as a core of social relationships. Power as coercive as well.
3. Ideas and values as weapons used by groups to advance its interests. Debates on 'ideology' and 'legitimacy'.



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Conflict theory emerges as an alternative as a functional theorization and it became more influential in sociological theorization. We know that we discussed Karl Marx in details and it becomes very evident that the very theoretical as well as intellectual as well as political motives of Karl Marx are very different from that of the other sociologists. That is a very important thing, what were the factors that really motivated the intellectual journey of Karl Marx.

Intellectual motif is a common thing for any intellectual, any scholar for that matter, but what the kind of peculiar motivations were and inspiration for Karl Marx and which were not shared by

lot of other equally important sociologists. And Marx was an unusual person. Marx had a very strong political project at hand.

One of the important things that really inspired Marx was this whole question of equality, the dream or the image of a more egalitarian society and his unending quest to understand why there are people living in completely different kind of situations, why that there is so much of power, inequality and why there is so much of exploitation, why there is so much of discrimination.

Why that handful people, a minority is able to rule over the vast majority of the people. And especially we discuss that his, and their answer revolve around the question of economy, the role of money, role of labor, I am not going into that. But that particular preoccupation to critically analyses the social structure and with that urge to bring about change was something quite radically opposite to that of the theorist who propounded function theory.

The social change and social order do not go together and cannot go hand in hand, one is seen as their opposite of the other in a society which is full of social change, you cannot really talk about social equality, social equilibrium or social stability, while we know that societies have both these elements, certain peculiar time periods would represent a face of rapid social changes or a face of prolonged equilibrium or prolonged status.

Marx was interested in the question of change, and struggle and conflict and again Marx was not the first scholar who were interested in the question of conflict, previously philosophers including Hegel really wanted to understand how social change happened. But on the other hand in terms of orientation, in terms of their political position, these two schools of thought, the conflict theory as well as the structural functionalism are seen as kind of antithetical.

They are seen as kind of opposite because structural functionalist understand conflict as something negative, when we discussed Georg Simmel. We saw that Simmel is one among the very first conflict theorists who spoke about the positive aspect of conflict. He spoke about how social conflict provides for increase in social solidarity, an increase in social control, a sense of belongingness to a society.

But otherwise in the conventional narrations of all the structure functionalist or all the functional school, you will see conflict is seen as something unwanted, as something that is negative,

something that is disruptive, something has everything to sabotage, their existing system, so traditional, even within sociological circle functionalism is seen as a more conservative kind of theorization whereas conflict theory is seen as a kind of a more radical social theory.

A theory which imagines radical outcome and that imagines alternative, more radical social order that is something extremely important and for theorists of conflict theory. Within that there are so many different strands such as people who believe in the political project of Marx, people who did not believe in the political project of Marx but still were interested in the question of understanding social conflict and social change.

It is a very broad, extremely rich area of intellectual engagement. So conflict theory in that sense is an extremely diverse and extremely rich set of theorizations starting with Marxist and then orthodox Marxist and neo-Marxist and a host of different labels and it would be very difficult, it would be very challenging for us to get some idea about the overall conflict theory in very short periodic time.

We will try and to summarize some of the key people, some of the interesting people and important people. So, it is better equipped to exchange social change and transformation in comparison with functionalism as we discussed so far because conflict theory looks at how rapid social changes happen, why there could be kind of much faster transformation take place in society, so since unlike structural functionalism that is pre-occupied with some order.

Conflict theory look such kind of power relation, the kind of disagreements, competition, violence and change of order, the introduction of new social orders, so change is the focal point of conflict theory. So, there are some of these important central assumptions of conflict theory. People have several interests; many of them are in conflict with others, most importantly emerging from material conditions.

So, conflict theory does not understand society as a very nice, peaceful setting where everybody lives happily, and everybody helps each other, that is a very positive picture is not something shared by people of conflict theory. They argue that there are very distinct social groups in society, it could be power, it could be prestige, it could be wealth, it could be something else, mostly revolving around the material condition.

They do not talk about other non-material condition, but non-material conditions become a part of the story related theorizations. So, they understand, for them conflict theory, for Marx and others, conflict theory, even with Hegel, conflict theory, society is a place where differently positioned people, differently positioned people into specific interest groups are constantly negotiating with each other, constantly studying with each other in order to protect their material interest.

What constitutes this material interest is the major center of discussion and debate, we know that for Marx this entire material condition we reduce it to economy whereas Weber did not agree that. Weber argued that along with material condition which is described using the class, the status and power are important. And a host of other sociologists have really tried to make very-interesting insights about this whole thing.

But fundamentally they would share the argument that this society is not a very peaceful one. Secondly this talks about power as a core of social relationship and power as coercive as well. And second important element of conflict theory is that they are really preoccupied with the question of power.

If structural functionalist were preoccupied with the question of social order, conflict theorists are preoccupied with the question of power. When structure functionalists argue that there is an order in society, there is an equilibrium in a society, there is peace in society, there is some kind of tranquility or this status quo society, conflict theory should agree that, of course, there is a tranquility, there is peace and there is a status quo.

But they would want to ask the question how is this peace or how is this order made possible because we know that any amount of order, any amount of equilibrium require some kind of a balance, some kind of a power play, the absence of change or equilibrium does not mean that there is no power. So, power plays an extremely important role in giving us the impression that a particular society is completely in the state of equilibrium or there is social order in society.

We can talk about feudal society or slave society which is completely peaceful because slaves do not try to resist, they do not try to revolt, they simply do the work that is asked by their masters

and if there is no revolt, if there is no agitation then we can call it as a place with lot of order but is it what the sociologists really want to understand.

So, then the Marxist or the conflict theorists should ask the question how is this order maintained, how is this order broken, what is the kind of a power relation that established and perpetuates this kind of order and that is a very uncomfortable question, you must be knowing that. That question has lot of potential to disrupt this all. That question has lot of potential to subvert this particular social order.

And that is a very uncomfortable question that many people refuse to ask and the scholars who belong to this particular group they did not hesitate to ask the question and they also think that power is as coercive as well. So, it is not only that power exist but this power has a coercive, an important Weberian and Marxian understand, when there is an order, because you cannot have a society where there is completely equal distribution of power.

In most of the society if there is a semblance of order is because there is very absolute kind of power is implode and the power has a coercive character. Power can be used to influence others. We can use to make people obey, to fall in line, it has this coercive element, it has the ability to inflict pain, and punishments can follow the power. So, they really want to understand how that power in its diverse form are understood, are implode and distributed.

How this monopolize, how this executed? Whether it is resisted or whether it is accepted without in the absence of any other option? So, these were the important pre-occupations, so important points of analysis of conflict theorists. Then ideas and values as weapons used by groups to advance its interests, debates on ideology and legitimacy.

This is yet another very-very important point because everybody knows, we know that human beings are ruled, we are governed not always on the basis of trait of whiles, is not it. We quote history, of course, there could be different periods in history where extreme form of violence was used to elicit obedience but that is not true for all time and it is also not something very durable. It is not something enduring.

You cannot force in order to keep a section of people under control rather everybody agree including Hegel and Marx and later scholars, especially Gramsci, is a very important Marxian

scholar, Gramsci realizes, Frankfurt School scholars realize that, this ideology and ideas, the real of ideas play an extremely important role in making people obeying in spite of their knowledge or without the knowledge that these things are not to the best of their interest.

These are not the best arrangements for them, so how is it possible? There are certain ideologies, very powerful ideologies, they have been designed and then executed and then perpetuated in such a manner that it always it supports the more powerful people and the expense of the sufferings of the vast majority people.

And how does it possible, why that is vast majority of the people who are at the receiving end do not realizes, what are the mechanisms through which these ideologies and then ideas are perpetuated without the people who are at the receiving end revolting against series. So, these were some of the important questions, these were some of the important rallying points of scholars who belong to conflict theorization.

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- They also think that a completely value neutral analysis is not possible, or required in social sciences
- The foundational influence of Karl Marx
- Materialist conception, economic determinism, role of ideology, revolutionary spirit, commitment to working class and so on.
- Influence of Weber as well, theorization on elites and so on



They also argued that, they also think that a completely value neutral position, analysis is not possible or rather it is not required in social sciences. So, they do not really believe in argument or the position of these arm-chair theorists, something that we have discussed about Karl Marx. Marx was not an arm-chair theorist. He did not believe in getting very cozy or comfortable professorship in some university and then live his life as a renowned economist or philosopher.

Rather he deliberately chose a very troublesome, very extremely difficult personal life, he has to flee from countries after countries and finally settle down in London and we will see when we discuss critical school, the scholars who started this critical school in Frankfurt in 1923, they all had to flee Germany when Adolf Hitler and Nazi ideology came into power because these intellectuals and their arguments were completely against the ideology of Hitler.

These people were extremely critically of fascism and that is the time when Adolf Hitler was targeting the intellectuals, so they have to leave their home, and most of other schools. So, they did not in their personal life, they did not believe that a completely value neutral analysis, neither it is possible nor it is required. They argued that such a position, where you are providing a very completely neutral analysis is simply not possible.

If you do not take sides and you think that neutrality is a very important virtue, but these people do not agree with that, they would say that in an extremely exploitative situation, in an extremely

violent society are taking no sides, means that you are siding with a perpetrator, you are siding with a powerful and they did not agree that.

In a society of fascism, in a society of capitalistic exploitation, in a society of casteist exploitation there are scholars who think that you can always take a very neutral position and then analyze things in a very objective manner and present it as it is. But there are other scholars who believe that activist scholars also need to take positions, very strong positions, mostly some of the important values of humanity.

Hence we come back to the foundational influence of Karl Marx, without any doubt Karl Marx has been the most inspirational figure, he has been the most important figure even today. Even today, even in 2020 we are discussing about Karl Marx, Marx in relevance today about this critic of religion analysis of capitalism, his ideas about alienation for example. So, I do not need to go into arguments of Marx again.

But Marx is the central figure and extremely influential, charismatic scholar who had a huge fan following, huge set of followers and intellectual scholars who followed his ideas, again in a completely different sector, somebody following a very orthodox Marxism, somebody reinterpreting Marxism, somebody arguing for a much more liberal understanding of Marxism, but Marx remains the central figure.

And some of his important ideas like materialist conception of society, we have discussed it sufficiently, economic determinism, and again there are arguments, especially Gramsci and a host of others would argue that Marx never spoke about this economic determinism. His whole ideal of economic determinism is a very orthodox Marx, it is a mechanical understanding of Marxism, as Marx never spoke about that.

And the role of ideology whether his ideology can be seen only as the super structure, is it only a byproduct of the economic structure and these are some of the very interesting discussion which emerge later with the works of critical school, with the works of Gramsci and a host of others. And the revolutionary spirit, of course, Marx was somebody who strongly believed in the intending revolution, which he very strongly believed that will alter, will overthrow the capitalist system and a far better egalitarian social system will come into picture.

Marx was personally committed to question of working class, and with sympathy slide with them, he looked at the bourgeoisie as and exploited the class. So, Marx remains the core ideological inspiration or the political inspiration of a host of leaders who belong to this category of conflict theory.

Then we have Max Weber again who dealt with questions of social stratification, who dealt with question of social differentiation who argued that stratification is something very important but it cannot be reduced to that of class alone and Weberian intervention is something extremely important and a host of conflict sociologist are heavily influenced by Weber, his insistence that you need to take into account the status quo question, we need to take into account the political question, political power and they cannot be reduced to that of class.

Class has to be seen as an independent part of manifestation of stratification. So, these two along with Hegel of course, Hegel becomes extremely important with the latter theorizations. So, these people, especially Marx and Weber and Hegel represent some of the important scholars.

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The Frankfurt School: Critical Sociology

Primary responsibility to be critical of the 'power elite' the 'establishment' and so on

Deep moral commitment to egalitarian society

The Institute of Social Research at the University of Frankfurt in 1923

Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm

Jurgen Habermas



So, there are lot of scholars who belong to this particular conflict theory, there are scholars who worked with the elites, there is Veblin who worked on elite class theory, looked at how there are very specific set of people who always occupy this elite position in the context of America, not a typical Marxist, Veblin was into the question of class and industrialization

But one of the most important and interesting groups of scholars, I just want to introduce to you is this School of Critical Sociologist. Critical sociologist is again a broad term and one of the important section in this is Frankfurt school which I just mentioned earlier. They establish this institute of social research at the University of Frankfurt in 1923 and they argued that the primary responsibility of the scholars is to be critical of the power elite or the establishment and so on.

This whole idea of critical sociology, the argument that the primary responsibility of social science is to critic, is to be critical of the society or of the power relation, of the power elite, of the establishment of the dominant class, this is an extremely important argument of the Frankfurt School. So, they would argue that when we live in a particular periodic time, you cannot escape the most dominant ideology and this particular dominant ideology provides with certain interpretation of the world.

Unless you develop critical fact is to understand, for example, there is a critic of mass culture, there the critic of popular culture, it talks about that, so unless you are critical of the dominant ideologies then you will never be able to see through these processes. Every important quality of sociological imagination, so they had taken it up among themselves as this ability to develop critic.

They were extremely fascinated by this concept of critic that includes Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and Erich Fromm. And Erich Fromm was heavily influenced by psychoanalysis and they brought in psychoanalysis as a very important element of analyzing this whole question of power and domination and they also believed that there is a deep moral commitment to egalitarian society.

They very strongly believed that a scholar has a moral responsibility to strive for a more egalitarian society. They started this institute in 1923, they came under enormous pressure from Hitler and they had to close down the department and they left for different places, some went to USA, some stayed back there, two of them came back, Horkheimer and Adorno came back.

This critical school is very influential, extremely popular, very celebrated in the sociological circles. And they criticize a host of Marxian notions as well and another important scholar who

comes much later if Jurgen Habermas, a German sociologist, a philosopher rather who became extremely one of the most important influential in intellectuals of all times. Habermas arguments about public fear, arguments about communicative rationality and a host of others.

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Critique of orthodox Marxian economic determinism

Analysis of culture, ideology etc and use of psychoanalysis

C Wright Mills- work on elites

Pierre Bourdieu- Reproduction of class and Habitus; Forms of capital, especially cultural capital



This critical school were quite critical of the orthodox Marxian economic determinism. They did not agree with the orthodox Marxian view that the ideologies or ideas are nearly a byproduct of economy they also believed that this space of ideology is something extremely important for you to fight, it cannot be simply left as a epiphenomenon of your economic substance.

They analyzed the concept of culture, ideology et cetera and use of psychoanalysis extensively and they could argue that many of this popular culture, many of the soft culture that you see, what function do they do to the ordinary people, why that, one of the main concerns for them was that why that vast majority of the people in spite of living under harsh realities do not they protest.

Why are they not really seeing the enemy clearly and then organize themselves, why that a political movement is not taking place in the most challenging times in Germany for that matter, Europe for that matter during 1920s and 30s, instead of a popular liberation movement, fascism was on the rise Europe. They dealt with these question and Habermas is an important scholar in this tradition

C W Mills, an American sociologist we started with this course, we discussed C Wright Mills and arguments about sociology and his work on elites is important, and the very important name is Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, extremely important and influential sociologist. His major concern was with the question of reproduction of class or this class distinction is reproduced. Why that the upper class is always able to maintain that superiority and why is that so difficult for the lower class to come up.

And what are the mechanisms which really ensure the stability of this class hierarchy and his concept of Habitus, his concept of different forms of capital, especial cultural capital, these are extremely important concepts, extremely important theorizations which are very efficiently, effectively being used even in the contemporary times, extremely important people.

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- Lewis A Coser argued for functional conflict theory



- Randall Collins and micro-level analysis of power relations

- Ralf Dahrendorf presented a dialectical conflict perspective, which still represents one of the best efforts to incorporate the insights of Marx and (to a lesser extent) Weber and Simmel into a coherent and non evaluative set of theoretical propositions.



Then we have all set of other scholars including Lewis Coser and Randall Collins and then Dahrendorf and a host of others who do not really share the kind of a political stand or what you call it as a left political position unlike the critical scholars and others. These people were influenced by Marxian thinking but they do not really take the political position unlike that of the previous scholars.

For example Lewis Coser talked about this functional conflict theory, he talks about what are the functions of conflict theory, you remember Simmel spoke about it, but he elaborates that further,

he talks about the manifest functions of conflict and latent functions of conflict, manifest functions as well as manifest dysfunctions, latent functions and latent dysfunctions.

And Randall Collins who argued for micro-level analysis of power relations rather than talking about large structures of class exploitation, large structures of working class and bourgeois who broader once. Then you have Ralf Dahrendorf who presented a dialectical conflict perspective, which still represent once of the best efforts to incorporate the insights of Marx and to a lesser extent Weber and Simmel into a coherent and non-evaluative set of theoretical propositions.

So, we spoke, as I mentioned earlier this tradition of conflict theory is something very-very rich in terms of the number of scholars involved, the number of theoretical arguments involved and they are especially after 80s, with the discovery of Antonio Gramsci, the Italian scholar, who then did the discovery of his work, his written works, especially Prison note and that brought in quite a lot of new energy into the academic works of conflict theorists.

His arguments of hegemony, his arguments against consent and these are some of the very fascinating theoretical arguments about how this power relations work in society. So, the kind of inspiration that is provided by Marx, the focus that you have to, you cannot escape the question of power, you cannot really escape the question of power, power in different forms and that is the central question along with a commitment for a more egalitarian society have been the central concern of conflict theory. So, let us stop here and we will meet for the next class, thank you.