UNIT 4  CONFLICT PERSPECTIVE*

Structure

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to understand:

- Introduction to the concept of Conflict in Sociology;
- The Classical Approach to the sociology of conflict;
- The contribution of major scholars; and
- The way conflict theory has adapted to modern society;

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Early in sociological theory there was a digression from conventional structural theory of social solidarity. The most fundamental distinction between functionalism and conflict theory is not that the notion of either structure or of change is absent from either of them but which of these holds center stage. Although conflict theory became accepted into sociological theory only in the twentieth century and obtained a specific label as a sub-branch with the work of Ralph Dahrendorf and Coser; it has been implicit in historiography from the time of ancient Greek thinkers like Thucydides. Conflict theory and functional theory consider both structure and change, for both are necessary aspect of all societies. Conflict and social change can only happen to existing structures and if we are looking at change, there is a need to begin with an entity, a social structure that changes. However unlike functionalists, conflict theorists consider conflict to be central to social structure, pushing it towards inevitable change. Conflict is seen as both contributive to positive stability as well as to anomic change. Thus concepts of social solidarity and stability appear in conflict theory as they appear in functional theory, but it only remains a matter of how these concepts are viewed and used in explanations of formation, maintenance and change in social organisations and relationships.

For a sociological perspective it is imperative to consider social groups as basic units and not individuals. In other words, conflict between individuals is not of scholarly interests but only that between groups. The identification and

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classification of such groups that can have a potential or actual conflicting relationship is central to conflict theory.

At the very basic level conflict theory assumes the existence of stratification, inequality and domination as integral aspects of all societies. Thus most social action is informed by the needs of either maintenance of inequality or to contest domination. Unequal distribution of social resources is both cause and effect of inequality and hierarchy and remains a moot cause of conflict. Escalation of conflict to a critical level may lead to social change leading to a new set of organisational principles that ensures that social resources are redistributed. For example the Russian revolution led to an overthrow of monarchy and its replacement by a communist/socialist regime. The conflict between the aristocrats and the common people had escalated to the extent that it led to the killing of the entire family of the Romanovs and complete turnaround of the power structures.

Inequality is both caused by and is itself causative of an uneven distribution of power. Thus inequality and the dynamic aspects of hierarchy remains a central concern of conflict theorists. The later generation of conflict theorists used power in more innovative ways to suit modern societies with different structures of control and domination. While discussing conflict theory the student needs to be careful in the choice of terminology as words that apparently look similar may have different meanings; for example differentiation and stratification and also contradiction and conflict. Thus differentiation does not necessarily involve stratification unless there is inequality and contradiction does not necessarily lead to conflict unless it precipitates a consolidation and confrontation of power leading to action. Potentialities for conflict does not mean that actual conflict will take place and even if conflict does occur it may not have the intensity for large scale social transformation.

4.2 THE CLASSICAL THEORISTS

The earliest theories of conflict were macro-historical in that they were concerned with the larger transformations that could take place in the structure of society due to conflict between its major social groups that are also interest groups often opposed in their goals. Sustained characters of the system that were naturally opposed were seen as historical conditions for evolution or transformation. The foremost among the early macro-sociologist who gave a comprehensive theory of social transformation through the operation of conflict between different segments of society was Karl Marx, in the nineteenth century. His theory of historical materialism paved the way for the formation of a conflict theory of social transformation based upon the essential contradiction that exists between classed based upon unequal economic distribution in society. According to him property (or capital) ownership gives rise to the bourgeoisie and the proletariats are the workers whose labour is exploited to keep the bourgeoisie in power. In political terms this was translated into a conflict between the haves and the have-nots, as put forward in the Communist Manifesto. But as a theorist and historiographer, Marx recognized a far more complex and nuanced reality as he chronicled the various historical epochs. His theory of social evolution was also predictive as he had visualized that feudalism will give way to capitalism (a process that was already underway) and then it will be followed by socialism (an obliteration of the concept of private property) where society would reach stability as all class contradictions would disappear. History tells us that this did
not happen so his theory was proved politically incorrect although the method of dialectics, of contradictory forces clashing to produce a third stage of stability or of new oppositions as the driving force of history was accepted and is the basic premise of conflict theory in sociology. But the sociological theory of conflict is essentially non-political; it neither favours communism nor capitalism or any other political ideology. The aim is to identify the various social groups and social forces that produce change and to produce a general theory of social structures and their organisation from a dynamic perspective.

The next major classical theorists can be identified as Max Weber. His major improvement upon Marxian theory was to show that the economy was not alone responsible for stratification and in addition to economic classes there are the status groups and power groups based on non-economic sources that were also responsible for social stratification. Weber also focused on forms of social organizations as it is through its various organisations that major weapons of conflict and revolt are developed and it is through organisations that society asserts its weapons of domination and control. Thus Weber had identified three ideal types of organisational structures, ideal-typical, bureaucratic and patrimonial which exist within any form of domination, a state a church or the economy. By introducing the concept of legitimacy into power, Weber was able to show how certain forms of domination become acceptable and may continue even if they are exploitative and discriminatory. There are social mechanisms such as socialisation that ensure that people at large accept institutions such as church and state, at least up to a point and alternate organisations, that challenge them must develop their own legitimacy and structure in order to be effective. Thus resisting forces need to organise too and develop internal bureaucracy in order to be effective. Organisations such as new political parties that originate in charismatic leadership also settle down to rational-legal and even traditional forms of leadership. Thus they may follow an election process for next generation of leadership (bureaucratic) or follow dynastic rule (traditional). A particular religious reform such as the Protestant reform (called Protestant because it protested against the existing edicts of the Catholic Church) came into existence because of the charismatic leadership of an individual Martin Luther, but later it acquired an organisation and now has an internal bureaucracy and status hierarchy like any other organisation. The present leaders of the protestant church are often not charismatic but only rational-legal (passing exams and getting training) and may only occasionally combine charisma with the more formal requirements. Thus although major transformations took place with this protest movement and initially there was and sometimes there still is violent conflict (as in Ireland) over the division of the Christian church, yet the new forms have become routinized and form a status based hierarchy. Weber had a lasting influence over the later development of sociology although all the scholars who came later did not build up on his contribution but followed their own path.

A major contributor to the classical conflict theory was Lewis Coser. Born in Berlin in 1913, he studied at the Sorbonne in Paris and was arrested during the WWII for being German and interned by the French government. He got asylum in the USA and did his Ph. D from Columbia University, New York, under Robert K Merton. Coser deviated from Weber and followed instead Simmel. He was of the opinion that conflict in inherent not just in society but in the human person; it is a part of our instinctual behaviour as humans. He put forward the concepts of absolute and relative deprivation. Absolute deprivation occurs when a human
group is subject to utter lack of resources to the extent that people are barely able to survive. They lack the most basic amenities like food, drinking water, health care, housing etc. The concept relative deprivation is used for those who are better off but having some level of survival resources are able to think and compare themselves with others who are much better off. Relative deprivation is more likely to occur when society as a whole is not too badly equipped but there are very stark disparities between the rich and the ordinary people. As observed, people living in absolute poverty rarely engage in violence as they simply do not have the capacity to do so. For example we hear about people in remote rural areas suffering from starvation, yet we never hear about such people engaging in conflict. However, as Coser points out, when people make the transition from absolute to relative deprivation, the chances of conflict increase. For example, the Dalit movement began, not from the rural areas where the untouchables lived a life of bare survival and utter misery. It began from the urban industrial areas, where the rural poor had migrated as wage labour. Although they were poor and exploited, yet they had some cash income and because as industrial labour, they worked in larger groups, they were able to come together and organise under the charismatic leadership of B.R. Ambedkar. Only when they came to urban cities and became exposed to urban life, were they able to comprehend their exploitation and reflect on their life conditions in a comparative perspective.

Coser also identified levels of conflict as arising from different social situations and conditions of development of conflict. When people have clearly defined goals which are both pragmatic and rational, the escalation and persistence of violence can be less likely. Since goals are clearly defined and achievable, such as say, higher salary for workers or better living conditions for urban poor; conflict will fizzle out once the demands are met. For example workers on strike may call off the strike. More violent and persistent levels of conflict arise if the goals are emotionally charged and transcendental. One may take as example the prolonged conflicts over religion, ethnic identities and sub-nationalisms. Such emotionally charged and esoteric goals are unresolvable, like the persistent violence in Northern Ireland between Catholics and Protestants that is unresolvable but often erupts into great violence.

Following the functional school of his times, Coser also identified the functional aspects of conflict by classifying conflict into two types, namely, external and internal to the group. Conflict that is internal to the groups is mostly of the low intensity but frequent type. When two (or more) potentially hostile groups live in close proximity to each other, like Whites and Blacks in the USA or Hindus and Muslims in India, Protestants and Catholics in Great Britain; there is likelihood of small scale and frequent skirmishes between them. However for most of the time, such low intensity violence can be brought under control by the internal law and order maintenance mechanisms and tensions tend to diffuse out, leading to relatively long periods of peace. The positive aspect of such small scale conflict is that it leads to better organisation of administrative machinery and also to have more evolved norms of conduct. For example frequent flare ups between workers and management, potentially damaging to the economy is controlled by improved labour laws. External conflict likewise tends to increase internal cohesion of the group and also draw more clearly defined boundaries.
4.3 MODERN CONFLICT SCHOOLS

The nomenclature of a Conflict perspective in sociology, in more recent times is attributed to Ralph Dahrendorf, who, also coming from Germany was the director of the London School of Economics for many years and from where he built up a recognized school of sociology of conflict. With reference to the existing sociological theories of his time, Dahrendorf was of the opinion that neither Marxism nor structural-functionalism was adequate to explain modern, industrial capitalist societies. The failure of Marxism lay in its inability to recognize the power of consensus and integration in contemporary democracies. Further, Parson’s structural functionalism does recognize change and Marxism cannot describe its theory of contradiction without presupposing an existing structure. Thus, no society least of all modern democracies are without both integrative and conflictual forces appearing side by side. What is most apparent is the far greater complexity of social structures than the dialectical model used in Marxism. In modern society there are many more varied forms of class than the bourgeoisie and proletariat visualized by Marx as the primary contradictions of society. Social inequality is no longer a matter of one strata having power and another being exploited. In modern industrial society, the workers are supported by trade unions, collective bargaining and legislative measures. Other agencies like International Labour Unions and Human Rights Commissions also intervene under many conditions.

The individual ownership of private property has been largely mitigated by the appearance of Joint Stock Companies, where as much as the capitalist owners, the managers and share-holders also have key roles to play. Thus Dahrendorf, in his classic work, Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society (1959:238) has given his own definition of class as follows,“By social class shall be understood such organized or unorganized collectivities of individuals as share manifest or latent interests arising from and related to the authority structure of imperatively coordinated associations. It follows from the definitions of latent and manifest interests that social classes are always conflict groups”. At a more generalized level and to account for the variations in interest holding groups and the complex nature of property and authority, Dahrendorf makes a broad division between the ‘command class’ and ‘obey class’ and class conflict would then refer to the conflict between those with authority and those without. But the drawback of this proposition is that social classes would exist in particular situations only as some people may be in authority in some place and may not be in another. Moreover social classes will be present all though society and cease to have any structural relevance. Thus for the structural and static notion of hierarchy Dahrendorf preferred to use the term strata and regarded class as a dynamic phenomenon of real society.

Another significant scholar of conflict theory is Gerhard Lenski. By the twentieth century, sociologists were more concerned with power as it was distributed in society and the manner in which it was applied, than simply in the concept of class as an economic category or static stratification. Lenski (1966:75) defined class as an “aggregate of persons in society who stand in a similar position with respect to some form of power, privilege and prestige”. More recent sociologists had to understand the play of power in society that was more dynamic, diverse and where there were many more positions to be filled and many sources from
which power could be drawn. The main question was to explain the basis on which power was distributed, who got what and why? Thus the concept of class was replaced by the concept of power classes.

In modern society there are layers of authority and control and like in a corporate structure, a large number of persons may be involved at various levels. It is possible that managers who have administrative authority do not get to use the profit that they help to make. The workers can put pressure and get their share of the profit through collective action. Thus authority and control may not always mean that the same people are enjoying all the profit thus generated. Wright (1979:18) thus modified the concept of class to bring the definition closer to the Marxian concept of appropriation. “Classes are defined by relations of appropriation of surplus product and secondarily defined by the relations of control over technical division of labour and relations of authority”. Thus managers are separated from the owners.

However conflict often remains latent and not manifest as long as the principle of legitimacy is applicable to those in power. Thus in modern societies also, some people, by virtue of their education and expertise may be seen to be naturally fit for a position of authority and others will obey without question. Thus proper basis for legitimation of authority will lead to a stable state of society and conflict may emerge when such legitimate reasons are challenged or questioned.

### 4.4 ELITE THEORY

Scholars like Lenski and Dahrendorf also brought in the concept of elites to explain social class and consequent conflict in society. The genesis of Elite theory is attributed to Vilfredo Pareto, an economist and political scientist (born of an Italian father and French mother in 1848) whose academic life flourished in Florence was also a classical theorist who believed in societies and social systems whose natural state was one of equilibrium. He followed Adam Smith in advocating for a liberal doctrine and free exchange with an aversion for state control. He saw power as the manifestation of corruption and malice and all these manifested in the state. However he attributed all differentiation and stratification to natural causes such as unequal capabilities, age, sex, physical strength and health as well as to demographic variables like fertility and fecundity. Therefore the resultant conflicts, contradictions and struggles were inevitable and natural. Even if sociologists could understand them, they could do nothing to eliminate them. While he acknowledged that society was in a constant state of change, he did not believe in linear progression, but believed that change was better represented as fluctuation and curves. In this respect as in all others, his theory of conflict is almost diametrically opposed to that of Marx.

He did not attribute any causation to economic or organisational factors but attributed everything to natural causes, blaming the nature of human beings instead. He defined elites as those who from within a group or class try to dominate others. The only was elites can continue to be in power, is spite of struggles to over throw them is either by using force to eliminate the opposition or by absorbing them within their fold. This process which he calls endosmosis is process of social circulation by which social mobility takes place for individuals but the class structure of society remains unaffected.
Lenski had defined four types of elites, but they had already been identified by Pareto in terms of their innate nature. Coercive elites (lions in Pareto’s terminology), Inducing elites (foxes), Expert elites (owls) and Commanding elites (bears). These are ideal types (Weber) and may overlap in actual situations. Thus a person who is an expert can also be commanding and coercive. One who is inducing, that is makes use of strategy, can at the same time be commanding, and so on. Dahrendorf’s postulation of command class and obey class also follow the same formula of an elite and a governed class.

According to John Scott (2001), the classical elite theory is meaningless in terms of being too inclusive. Thus when we are talking of broad categories like Dahrendorf and Pareto, the definition of power being too inclusive loses its meaning. He postulated that positional studies should be replaced by more dynamic categories. Also that power should only be defined according to the effect that it has. Thus real social power can be defined in terms of the power wielder’s conscious effort to affect the conduct of those who are subordinated. Thus, a real elite cannot be defined in terms of ability or status but should be confined to those who can actually exercise power, or have the potential to exercise it. Since power cannot be exercised in a vacuum, elite theory or the concept of social power can only be visualized in terms of two parties to it; the one exercising and the other on whom it is being exercised.

Thus power relations are intrinsically asymmetrical and therefore involve at least two parties with conflicting interests and goals. Elite theory with its emphasis on hierarchy and exercise of social power thus is essentially a conflict theory.

### 4.5 RECENT TRENDS IN CONFLICT THEORY

In the more recent times, there has been a trend towards cultural construction of institutional structures more than on relational structures. One of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century, Michel Foucault brought about a paradigm shift in the understanding of power. Unlike all conventional understandings of power, Foucault was of the opinion that power is not concentrated in specific agents or strata but is diffused in all aspects of society. Power need not be always destructive but can be as aspect of collective effort towards improvement and production. Foucault used the concept of capillary power to describe power that is diffuse and can be used in any situation and by anyone. Even in a group of friends, a certain person can take control in a particular situation, like sudden crises; someone takes ill at a picnic or a school bus goes into an accident and so on. According to Foucault, conflict, negotiation and contradictions are part of every relationship.

John Scott explains that power can be broadly understood as having two kinds of influence. Corrective influence that operates through punishments and rewards and persuasive influence that operates through arguments, appeals and reasoning. The former can be divided into two types, use of force and manipulations and the second type also has two forms, signification and legitimation. The latter becomes effective by a collective belief and operates through shared cognitive meanings and value commitments. This does not mean that the latter is less exploitative or does not actually support hierarchy, but that it makes people believe otherwise. The latter process is able to contain conflict and prevent any kind of dissent because it manages to hide the reality of the situation.
Foucault had throughout his works shown how the most effective modes of control are those that are least obvious. Randall Collins (1975) added a micro-level to the macro-level of conflict theory. Like Foucault, he too located conflict in the processes of day to day life. All relationships are based on some antagonism, domination and conflict on the one hand and there are also patterns of solidarity on the other. Unlike the sweeping generalized metatheories of the classical conflict theorists, the more recent scholars like Collins, depended more on empirical data and more grounded theorisation. Collins made use of Goffman’s model of interaction rituals, using the concepts of front stage and back stage performance. These refer to the play acting people resort to when putting up a front stage performance. Goffman had likened all social interaction to stage performances for most of us pretend and say and do things that we may not always mean. Thus those who receive orders to obey may do so, overtly but keep resentment in their own minds. The back stage performance refers to those situations where we let down our guard and talk and perform freely. Thus a man may take orders from his boss and be deferential to him overtly, even praise him to his face. But when at home with his wife, he may let out steam and abuse the boss, and even call him an idiot. Thus performance rituals hide real feelings and antagonisms. At the same time solidarity among equals is sustained by solidarity rituals like sharing meals or helping the other in performance of tasks.

Thus the complexities of organisational structures are conditioned by the struggle for power that may remain subversive but yet spill over occasionally. Thus antagonisms in an office may escalate to an overt defiance of the authority of the boss, or a strike may take place in a factory. The contemporary scholars are more interested in identifying the micro-processes of struggle and management in real life situations. Rather than grouping people into larger classes the micro-process theorists are more interested in more complex and detailed analysis of status groups and people occupying different roles in the competition for resources and power.

Check Your Progress
1) What is the most salient difference between a functional and a conflict approach to study society?

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2) Explain classical conflict theory as a theory of macro-historical process of social transformation.

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3) What is Elite theory? How does it explain conflict?

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4) Discuss the contribution of Ralph Dahrendorf to Conflict theory.

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5) Where is power located in society? Discuss.

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6) What do you understand by the micro-processes of social power? Discuss with suitable examples.

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4.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit the student has learnt about the theories that focus on organisation of society, upon the allocation of resources and division of power. In all human societies, except may be the very simplest ones, everyone is never equal and while in a small society, people are usually allocated according to given norms, in most other societies, the control and distribution of resources; questions regarding who gets what, and how, are determined by the structure of organisation of the society, that is inevitably stratified. Some scholars are of the opinion that inequality is an inevitable condition of being human while others think that we can overcome it and come to a more equitable and just order. While Pareto belongs to the first kind, Karl Marx, may be cited as an example of the latter.
As we have seen, genesis of conflict theory is usually attributed to the class theory of Karl Marx. But later scholars, while accepting in principle the dialectically opposed forces of contesting groups, debated on the nature of these groups. A reliance on the sole criteria of economy or ownership of property was discarded to recognize many other sources of power in society, such as those based on expertise, knowledge, political maneuvering and other criteria like gender, race and ethnicity.

With the coming in of new age capitalist society, one that differs significantly from what Marx had conceptualised, we have come to the age of the corporate, of public sector enterprises, and of joint stock holding companies where ownership, authority and control may vest in different locations of the organisation. Scholars have varied in their approach to giving primacy to certain kinds of power. While some see it in authority and legitimacy, others are more inclined to view power as the sole property of coercion and ability to make others do as one wishes them to do.

While the classical conflict theories are macro-historical looking towards larger evolutionary kind of social transformations and their causative factors, the more recent trends are towards looking at conflict in terms of its every day appearances. The more recent theoreticians are inclined towards empirical research and identifying the micro-processes of contradiction, conflict and its outcomes in specific locations.

Conflict theorists are not engaged only in the study of conflict but also in its resolution and in the study of social solidarity and the maintenance of social equilibrium. The only difference from functionalists is that they study how equilibrium and continuity are maintained, given the conditions of potential conflict, generated by the inevitable hierarchy, inequality and exploitation that are the normal conditions of all societies, differing only in degree. Thus conflict theorists take conflict as a normal and inherent condition of social relationships as well as organisations. Thus society passes from one state of maintenance of stability to another state by making changes in its organisation. These organizations aim towards minimization or masking of the real conditions of conflict, always present but not necessarily always manifest.

Conflict theory is thus a study of social organisation overall and of social behavior and only differs methodologically in whether the scholars take a macro-historical perspective or a situational empirical one. Conflict theory has been especially useful in study of inequality, stratification and hierarchy, both in their understanding and in the location of their cause. Overall thus conflict theory is applicable to the removal or redressal of such inequalities but the theories are not in themselves political.

4.7 REFERENCES


