

Quadrant II – Transcript and Related Materials

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Notes

Conflict Theory

Ralf Dahrendorf's conflict theory arose primarily as a reaction against structural functionalism and in many ways represents its antithesis where structural functionalism sees a near harmony of purpose from norms and values, conflict theory sees coercion, domination and power.

Dahrendorf saw both theories as addressing different situation, depending upon the focus of the study. According to Dahrendorf functionalism is useful for understanding consensus while conflict theory is appropriate for understanding conflict and coercion.

For Dahrendorf the distribution of authority was a key to understanding social conflict. Authority is located not within people, but within various positions. Authority is created by the expectation of certain types of action associated with particular positions, including subordination of others and subordination to others.

Various positions of authority exist within associations. The fault lines that split up around competing loci of authority generate conflicting groups. The conflict between these groups values their interaction, with the result that authority is often challenged and tenuous.

Much as Merton looked at latent and manifest functions, Dahrendorf identified latent and manifest interests or unconscious and conscious interests. The connection between these two concepts was a major problematic for conflict theory.

Dahrendorf posited the existence of three types of groups-quasi group, interest group and conflict groups. Dahrendorf felt that under ideal circumstances, conflict could be explained without reference to any other variables.

The Work of Ralf Dahrendorf

Like functionalists, conflict theorists are oriented toward the study of social structures and institutions. In the main, this theory is little more than a series of contentions that are often the direct opposites of functionalist positions. This antithesis is best exemplified by the work of Ralf Dahrendorf (1958, 1959), in which the tenets of conflict and functional theory are juxtaposed. To the functionalists, society is static or, at best, in a state of moving equilibrium, but to Dahrendorf and the conflict theorists, every society at every point is subject to processes of change. Where functionalists emphasize the declines of society, conflict theorists see dissension and conflict at every point in the social system. Functionalists (or at least early functionalists) argue that every element in society contributes to stability; the exponents of conflict theory see many societal elements contributing to disintegration and change.

Functionalists tend to see society as being held together informally by norms, values and a common morality. Conflict theorists see whatever order there is in society as stemming from the coercion of some members by those at the top. Where functionalists focus on the cohesion created by shared societal values, conflict theorists emphasize the use of power in maintaining order in society.

Dahrendorf (1959, 1968) is the major exponent of the position that society has two faces (conflict and consensus) and that sociological theory therefore should be divided into two parts, conflict theory and consensus theory. Consensus theorists should examine value integration in society, and conflict theorists should examine conflicts of interest and the coercion that holds society together in the face of these stresses. Dahrendorf recognized that society could not exist without both conflict and consensus, which are prerequisites for each other. Thus, we cannot have conflict unless there is

some prior consensus For example, French housewives are highly unlikely to conflict with Chilean chess players because there is no contact between them, no prior integration to serve as a basis for a conflict. Conversely, conflict can lead to consensus and integration. An example is the alliance between the United States and Japan that developed after World War II. Despite the interrelationship between consensus and conflict, Dahrendorf was not optimistic about developing a single sociological theory encompassing both processes It least conceivable that unification of theory is not feasible at a point which has puzzled thinkers ever since the beginning of Western philosophy" (1959:164). Eschewing a singular theory, Dahrendorf set out to construct a conflict theory of society.

Conflict Model

A Conflict is regular and perpetual because of the inevitability of power/authority differentials in human society.

A social system be it a small group, a clique a formal organisation community or an entire society is characterised by institutional patterns of roles displaying power differentials in which some positions have the authority to dominate others. The ruling cluster of roles has an interest in preserving the status quo and the ruling class has an interest in redistributing power.

Social reality is typified by an unending cycle of conflict over authority/power within the various types of groups that constitute the social world. . The contest for authority/power between the ruling and the ruled cause polarisation between the two groups that leads to conflict and produce change in social systems in the form of redistributed authority In turns, the redistribution of authority/power products institutionalisation of a new cluster of ruling and ruled roles that, under certain conditions, polarise into two interest groups that initiate another contest for authority/power producing conflict.

Sudden exhalation in the perception of relief about their deprivation increases the likelihood of violent conflict. However, actual violence would occur only if the social system has not developed regulatory procedures for dealing with grievances and releasing tension.

Power and Dialectical Change

Dahrendorf sees conflict as universally present in all human relations. But Dahrendorf doesn't see the inevitability of conflict as part of human nature; he sees it, rather, as a normal part of how we structure society and create social order achieved? However, rather than acting agreement about norms, assuming collective values and social positions, as parsons does, Dahrendorf argues that it is power that both defines and enforces the guiding principles of society. Dahrendorf also follows coser in talking about the level of violence and its effects, but Dahrendorf adds a further variable: conflict intensity

Dahrendorf's Theory on Class Conflict

Within the field of sociology, Ralf Dahrendorf worked to develop conflict theory. This new theory attempted to bring together structural functionalism and Marxism. Dahrendorf states that capitalism has under one major changes since Marx initially developed his theory on class conflict. This new system of capitalism, which he identifies as post capitalism is characterised by diverse class structure and a fluid system of power relations. Thus, it involves a much more complex system of inequality. Dahrendorf contends that post capitalist society that has institutionalised class conflict into state and economic spheres.e.g., class conflict has been habituated through unions, collective bargaining, the court system and legislative delicate. In effect, the severe class strife typical of Marx time is no longer relevant. Dahrendorf's theory often took the opposite view of functionalists. Conflict theory said that every society at every point is subject to process of change. He believes that there is dissensions and conflict at every point in the social system and many societal elements as contributing to disintegrations and change. They believe order comes from coercion from those at the top. They believe that power is an important factor in social order. Dahrendorf believe that both conflict theory and consensus theory are necessary because they reflect the two parts of society. Consensus theory focuses on the value integration into society, while conflict theory focuses on conflicts of interest and the force that hold society together despite these stresses. Dahrendorf wanted to understand how conflict works. He did not believe the two theories could be combined and focused on developing the conflict theory

Ralf Dahrendorf's Conflict in Industrial Societies

The aim of Dahrendorf's conflict theory is to develop a coercion or conflict approach towards understanding society. Dahrendorf claims that the social structure of advanced societies has undergone some very significant changes

since Marx's time. These changes have resulted in a 'transformed' capitalism or what Dahrendorf calls an industrial society, where power is vested in 'imperatively coordinated institutions and experts, some of the characteristics of this new type of society.

Criticism of The Dialectical Conflict Model

The most conspicuous criticism of Dahrendorf's causal imagery comes from Peter Weingart. He has argued that in deviating from Marx's conception of the 'sub-structure of opposed interests' existing below the cultural and institutional edifices of the ruling classes, Dahrendorf forfeits a genuine causal analysis of conflict and therefore, an explanation of how patterns of social organisation are changed. While Dahrendorf sought to blend the ideas of structural functionalism and Marxism conflict theory did little to improve the theory conflict has many of the same problems of structural functionalism. Conflict theory is also linked to structural functionalism by its ideas about systems positions and roles. Overall, the theory has few similarities with Marxism In addition; the theory takes only a macro-sociological perspective. The theory fails to address much of social life.