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# UNIT 28 CLASS CONFLICT

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## 28.0 OBJECTIVES

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After studying this unit, you should be able to:

- describe what is conflict;
- differentiate between conflict and competition;
- provide Karl Marx's views on conflict;
- discuss Coser and Dahrendorf's views on conflict; and
- enumerate the drawbacks of conflict theory.

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## 28.1 INTRODUCTION

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'Conflict' is the deliberate attempt to oppose, resist or coerce the will of another or others. Conflict arises from a clash of interests. Class conflict as such can be defined as a struggle over values, or claims to Status, Power and scarce resources in which the aims of the conflicting parties are not only to gain the desired values, but also to neutralise, injure or eliminate their rivals.

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## 28.2 CONFLICT AND COMPETITION

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The difference between conflict and competition is that :

- i) Conflict always included an awareness of an adversary whereas Competition occurs without actual knowledge of other's existence.
- ii) In competition, two or more parties want something all cannot share, but they do not strive for the purpose of denying or opposing others.

- iii) Competition is always governed by moral norms, fair tactics, while much of Conflict is not.

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## 28.3 THE FUNCTIONALIST VIEW

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The functionalists (Talcott Parsons, Davis and Moore, Tumin) assume that there are certain basic needs or functional pre-requisites which must be met if any society is to survive and function. They assume that parts of society form an integrated whole and examine the ways in which the social stratification system is integrated with other systems of a society to contribute to its functioning. These functional theories have been greatly criticised. Among the critics it is the Conflict theorists who have mainly criticised functionalists as Utopian.

### 28.3.1 Criticisms of Functional Approach

- i) The conflict theorists regard the functionalist approach as Utopian in nature and emphasise the need to study conflict in systems of stratification as a universal, all pervasive and an Omnipresent phenomena.
- ii) The conflict theorists say that all societies are characterised by some degree of constraint, disagreement, uncertainty, control, dysfunctional and coercions that can't be ignored.
- iii) However, unlike the functionalists, the conflict theorists do say that, conflict leads to stability and consensus in society.
- iv) It becomes important to study also the nature of consensus and equilibrium in a given system with conflict.

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## 28.4 CLASS CONFLICT THEORY

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Some of the **basic assumptions** of the Class conflict theory as it has evolved today, can be listed as follows :

- i) Society is not in a state of constant harmony, equilibrium, instead it consists of a structure composed of elements of coercion and subjugation and frequent imbalances are observed in this structure.
- ii) The various elements of this society are in the process of continuous change.
- iii) All these conflicts and changes are acted out in the social atmosphere are called social conflicts.
- iv) Finally these class conflicts are inherent in the very nature of the social structure.

An analysis of society by certain class conflict theorists such as Karl Marx, Coser, Dahrendorf and C.W. Mills have studies class conflict in modern industrial societies.

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## 28.5 KARL MARX : VIEWS ON CLASS CONFLICT

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The main attempt to explain the class conflict theory emerged with from the theory of Karl Marx in his class work on Capitalism. Marx had stated that 'The History of all Hitherto Existing Societies is the History of Class Struggle'. This would mean that any society is fundamentally divided into two realms – Infra-structure and Super-structure.

### Box 28.01

**The Infra-structure consists of the economic-sphere, this was the basic strength giving structure of society and any changes in it would affect the other structures. Marxism shows that all conflicts arise in relation to this economic realm and within it the unequal distribution of means of production.**

Freeman and Slaves, Patrician and Plebeian, Lords and Serfs, in a word Opposer and the Opposed are the names of Social classes in different historical periods. These classes are distinguished from each other by the difference of their respective position in the economy.

Engles and Marx, identified primitive Communism, Ancient, Slave society, Feudal Society, Modern capitalism as principal historical forms of society. The mode of production of each epoch determines the social, political and religious features of society at that particular state in history, as well as the nature of class relations.

### 28.5.1 Aspects of Class Conflict

The Infra-structure in Capitalist society consisted of two rival classes – the Bourgeoisie or the Owners of the means of production (Have’s) and the Proletarian or the non-owners (Have-nots). This group works for the former since the main aim of the Bourgeoisie i.e. to achieve maximum profit, he develops inhuman attitude towards the workers, this result in exploitation and alienation of the workers, who because of their feelings of discontentment and deprivation acquire feeling of class-consciousness. These Self-conscious classes then came into conflict with each other in order to protect their own interests.

#### Check Your Progress 1

1). Write a note on aspects of class conflict. Use about 10 lines for your answer.

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2) The owners of the means of production in capitalism are known as the (Tick the right answer)

- i) proletariat
- ii) bourgeoisie
- iii) power elite
- iv) have not's.

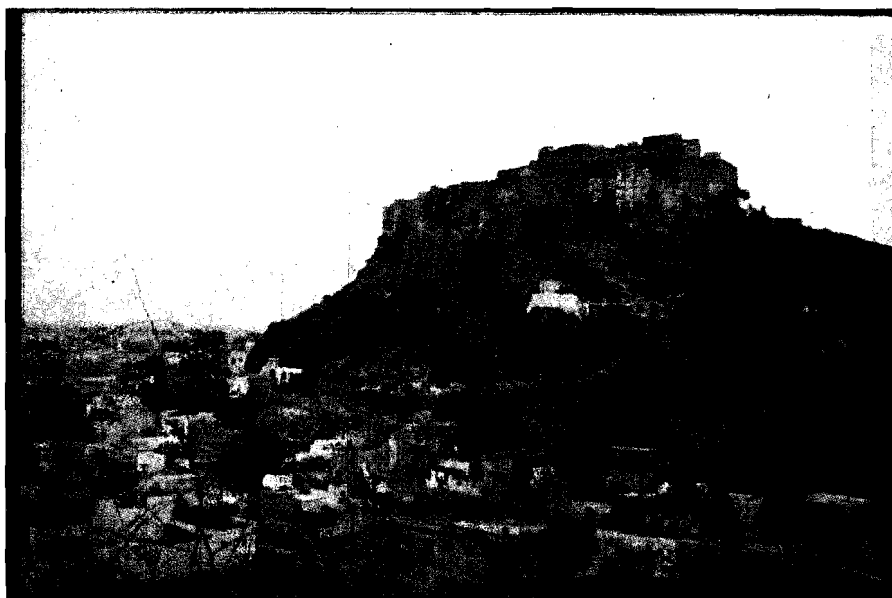
Unlike the Utilitarians who feel that self-interest regulates a harmonious society, Marx felt that this was the fundamental source of conflict. In the case of a capitalist society, the rich capitalists were united on the basis of common political and ideological thinking and this served the same function for them as class-consciousness did for the workers. Once the workers begin to feel that they are being neglected from within the process of production they will seek to change society. According to Marx, this would bring about the destruction of the capitalist system. Here we notice clearly how conflict gives rise to a new value system and how it serves as functional.

Marx’s theory of class and class conflict was incorporated into the larger framework of his theory of social change which now forever is helpful for historical and social theories in their analysis of society. However, his theory has been criticised.

## 28.5.2 Criticism of Marx's Views

Marx's theories have subjected to much criticism. Thus:

- i) His pre-occupation with class led him to neglect other social relationships as well as the influence of nationalism and of conflict between nations in history. He also neglected the growing sense of national community in European nations that brought about new moral and social conceptions with emphasise common human interests.
- ii) Marx is also criticised on the grounds of his conception of class division. Evidence shows that 20<sup>th</sup> Century capitalism has created condition where the working class can no longer be regarded as totally alienated. Man's condition has improved along with the general standard of living and the expansion of social services and security of employment.
- iii) Also the growth of a new middle class contradicts the theory of Polarisation of classes. This new class comprising of workers, supervisors, managers etc. introduces an important element of stratification namely social prestige based on occupation, consumption and styles of Lillie.
- iv) Rapid rates of mobility present the persistence of class in Marxian sense, as a result, status group become more important.
- v) The working class remains highly differentiated in terms of skill occupation. Therefore, classes are not homogenous. The expansion of the middle class and the general improvement in the standard of living has led to embuogeoisment of the working class.



**In large fortresses of medieval India, the castes adjusted to each other.**

*Courtesy: B. Kiranmayi*

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## 28.6 THE VIEWS OF LEWIS COSER

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Lewis Coser regards conflict as functional for society. He says that social reality is a product of inter-related parts. Imbalances between these parts, give rise to inter-group and intra-group conflicts which is an important element of social interaction. Coser feels that conflict frequently helps to reform existing norms or it contributes to the emergence of new

values in society. In saying this he goes to the extent of saying that a balance of power is a factor in social relationship.

Class/Social conflicts exist most where there is a high frequency of interaction between the members of a society. Coser feels conflict acts like a system of safety valve, to unite individuals to fight against the common enemy.

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## 28.7 DAHRENDORF AND CLASS CONFLICT

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Ralf Dahrendorf feels that class conflict is fundamental to social life and a deviation from normal conditions while developing the dialectic model. As Marx Dahrendorf kept the basic assumption in mind that class conflict arises out of inherent contraindications of all societies into antagonistic groups within functioning institutions. Like Marx, he also talks about two classes related to each other with conflicting tendencies. In other words, divided society into two classes – those with authority and those without authority. These groups have opposite interests. Those with authority want to maintain their status-quo and those without it want to change the structure of authority relations. These groups with collective interests are finally called conflicting classes.

### Box 28.02

**Dahrendorf in spite of being influenced by Marx, did not feel that changing the ownership of production would eliminate conflict. Rather he feels that a revolution would just lead to a new set of antagonistic classes which would perpetuate conflict within society. This is the dialectic model.**

According to Dahrendorf, conflict operates within Imperatively Co-ordinated Associations (ICA) of society, over questions of power and authority. The conflicting relations operating within the ICA's which are units of social action. Such ICA's would be Church's, Chess Clubs etc. Since each ICA is related to other ICA's within the same society, conflict may be both inter-group and intra-group in nature. Within an ICA, there is a hierarchy of positions of power – conflict arises in relation to these positions. Since each society, whatever be its level of development, has various ICA's and each ICA has conflicting relations within it. All ICA's together contribute to conflict within the society as a whole. This conflict may be suppressed or resolved through the mechanism of conflicting allegiances and contribute to the stability as a whole.

According to Dahrendorf a change or progression occurs in class societies from 'quasi groups' which have only underlying or 'latent interests' to a situation where there are 'interest groups' which have a common consciousness. They feel that these are in a similar situation and therefore their interests become clear to all of them – that is these interests become 'manifest'. Thus while sharing latent interests is an important condition it does not suffice to create the progression, which itself demands communal living and other aspects of culture.

### Activity 1

**Which model fits Indian reality best? Is it the functional model or the conflict model? Discuss your analysis with other students in the study centre.**

Thus Dahrendorf posits that class conflict results from the intrinsic structures of authority relations themselves. Dahrendorf argues that it is not the economic relations between superiors/subordinates that results in conflict situations. Their main point however is the authority that one or some have over the other(s). While the boss/employee relationship is conflictual, it is clear that similar conflicts would arise in any organization which has authorities and subordinates e.g. a hospital, university or military battalion.

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## 28.8 C.W. MILLS AND THE POWER ELITE

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C.W. Mills has highlighted the class power structure as seen in the specific case of America. He talked about the division of the society into two classes – Elites and Masses.

Elite means the choicest or the best. It represents a minority group of people who may be socially acknowledged as superior in some sense. The elite theory evolved as a reaction against the Marxian theory of class and opposed the concepts of a classless society, elite rule is inevitable and a classless society in an illusion.

Another aspect of these elite theories is that they criticise the determinism in Marxism but they themselves tend to show this by not merely stressing that every society has been divided into two strata – ruling minority and ruled majority but that all societies must be so divided. Pareto claimed that one type of political society is universal validity of this “Law of elites and masses”.

Marx’s theory stated that in every society, there existed a ruling class, owing the means of production and having political dominance and one or more subject classes. These two are always in conflict which is influenced by the development of productive forces i.e. changes in technology. For Marx, the conflict would result in the victory of the ruling class, ultimately leading to the formation of a classless society. This has been rejected by elite theorists.

As mentioned earlier, C.W. Mills talks about two classes in society, the elite class who rules as opposed to the masses who are ruled. He feels that the power elite comprises of three sections of society namely military, industry and politics. This he calls monokithic power structure of America. These elite groups are further strengthened because of superior educational facilities and powerful family background. The masses are passive recipients and they do not challenge the positions of elites. Hence, the elite group is able to maintain its position in the society.

**Check Your Progress 2**

- 1) Give the views of C.W. Mills on the existence of classes in America. Use about five lines for your answer.

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- 2) Fill in the blanks

The (a)..... consider (b).....

(c)..... to be the principal force producing change.

The Marxists consider class conflict to be the principal force producing change, where the elite theorists attribute change to recurrent decadence of elite, rise of new elite and circulation of elites. The composition of the ruling class changes only with rapid change in the whole system of production and property ownership. This “circulation of elites” or “Social mobility” is an important characteristic of modern societies.

**Activity 2**  
  
**Does the power elite analysis apply to India? If so, who would comprise the power elite? Talk to various people before reaching your conclusion. Discuss with other students in the study centre.**

**28.9 CONFLICT THEORY : AN APPRAISAL**

We now turn to some of the drawbacks of class conflict theory. We point out that

- i) The conflict school tends to indicate that all conflict and contradictions divide society

into two polar opposites. A clear division of society in this manner is not possible.

- ii) They also assume that the society is in a continuous and unending process of change. This is not true as many traditional societies have not changed very much.
- iii) Further, these theorists tend to always equate conflict with change. They tend to assume that change follows conflict naturally. But it is proved that while conflict may follow change vice-versa may not be true.
- iv) The conflict theorists have failed to differentiate between positive and negative conflicts. They do not acknowledge the facts and conflicts contribute as much as to social integration and stability as to disintegration and change.
- v) And finally these theorists have relied heavily on illustrative materials rather than on empirically verifiable data.

Although the conflict theory over-emphasise its role in society and tries to ignore the role played by contract in maintaining stability in society. It is more rational and non-utopian approach to study class division.

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## 28.10 LET US SUM UP

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Class conflict theory has many shades and has been put forward by as diverse thinkers as Marx and Mills, Coser and Dahrendorf. It is a theory which has developed since the 19<sup>th</sup> century into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond have described the various shades of class conflict theory and also pointed out its drawbacks in this unit.

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## 28.11 KEY WORDS

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- Conflict** : A condition where there is opposition between groups of people over working rights and working relationships.
- Class** : A large group of people which are united by commonality of situation and interests. There can be “class in itself” a broadly statistical category or “class of itself” where there is a consciousness regarding other members of the class and a proactive attitude.
- Polarization** : A situation where society has become organized by social processes into two opposing classes, or the “have’s” and the “have not’s”.
- Power Elite** : This comprises the ruling class, which according to Mills is a mix of military, business and political groups.

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## 28.12 FURTHER READINGS

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## 28.13 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Class conflict is associated with Karl Marx’s theories of capitalism where the owners of the means of production and the proletariat or workers were in opposition, antagonistic and alienated from one another. The exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie leads to two violently conflicting social groups and ultimately to revolution or the violent overthrow of the capitalists by the workers.

2) (ii).

**Check Your Progress 2**

- 1) Class structure in America was studied by C.W. Mills who felt that there existed two broad classes the 'elites' and the 'masses'. The elites ruled and came from the most influential backgrounds. In fact for Mills it was the 'power elite' which ruled the masses of America. The 'power elite' according to C.W. Mills comprised of the top military personnel, big commercial establishments and major political leaders. These three groups according to Mills made the major decisions in America.
- 2) (a) Marxists (b) class (c) conflict.



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## NOTES