
UNIT 7 COSER AND DAHRENDORF ON SOCIAL CLASSES

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7.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you should be able to indicate :

- the functions of conflict;
- dahrendorf's theory of capitalism;
- the difference between Marx's conception of capitalism and that of Dahrendorf; and
- compare Coser's theory with that of Dahrendorf's theory.

7.1 INTRODUCTION

Two opposing theoretical formulations namely Functionalism and Conflict theory have dominated sociological theorising. These have been projected as mutually exclusive, both in terms of domain assumptions as also in terms of their background/ideological assumptions. Functionalism has been seen as a conservative, status-quoist theory, whereas Conflict theory is a radical, progressive one. The debate over which of the two orientations is the appropriate one has led to a convergence between them. The works of Coser and Dahrendorf indicate it. It is particularly so when they examine the phenomenon of social stratification. Both draw heavily upon Marx, but tend to diverge from him. It must be mentioned that Coser's focus was on the study of positive consequences of group conflict and class conflict being a mere variant. On the other hand class and class conflict are the primary focus of Dahrendorf.

We now turn to specifically examine each of these thinkers.

7.2.1 Coser

As functionalism generally and functional theories of stratification, particularly becoming increasingly popular, a small number of scholars began to point out its shortcomings. One of the most telling criticisms was directed against the assumption that social systems are organised on the basis of a broad-based consensus around a system of values. Harmonious functioning of diverse substructures constituted the model.

At the empirical level however, it was quite evident that conflicts of various kind and intensity between and within groups were continually taking place. How does one account for this anomaly? Are conflicts merely an aberration, a passing case of deviance which can be taken care of by the built-in mechanism of social control in the social system? Or are conflicts as much a characteristic feature of the system as consensus? If the latter is the case, then what is the relation between the two? It is this question that Coser was concerned with.

Inspired by Georg Simmel's pioneering work in the area of inter group relations, Coser sees conflict playing a positive, functional role. Coser begins his argument first put forth by Simmel that conflict performs two functions: First, it establishes the identity of groups within the system. It strengthens group consciousness one makes them aware that they are separate from the 'others' they are opposing. It is quite close to what Parsons calls boundary maintenance. Secondly, 'reciprocal repulsions' a phrase used by Simmel, create a balance between groups and thereby contribute to the functioning stability of the social system as a whole.

Although the twin functions of conflict are applicable to all cases of group conflict, these are particularly apt for understanding conflict between stratified groups-castes and classes.

7.2.2 Function of Conflict

The function of conflict in establishing and maintaining group identities is quite clear in Marx's theory of class. For him classes constitute themselves only through conflict with another class. Individuals may store common objective positions with others and yet may not be aware of the communality of interests. It is a class-in-itself. They become a class i.e. class for itself, only when they carry out a common battle against another class.

Let us now turn to the caste system and the role of conflict within it. Let us recall the second function mentioned above, namely 'reciprocal repulsions'. Coser believes that conflict between castes not only establishes distinctiveness and separateness of the various castes but also ensures the stability of the total Indian social structure.

This is possible as a result of a balance of claims made by rival competing castes. Members of the same caste are drawn together in a solidarity resulting from their common hostility and rejection of members of other castes. Hierarchy of positions in the system is maintained because of the rejection by the subgroups or castes in the society of each other.

7.2.3 Conflicts and Rejections

The discussion so far has focussed on the conflicts and rejections of strata and castes of one another and the functional consequences following from them. To recapitulate, two such functions have been mentioned. First conflict with other groups leads to integration and solidarity within the group. Secondly, the system as a whole is maintained by a balance of aversions the groups have for one another.

Activity 1

**Discuss with other students the question of conflict. Can conflict have a function?
Write your thoughts in your notebook.**

An important qualifications is required at this stage for the foregoing discussion. Sometimes, out-groups instead of becoming targets of hostility and rejection, actually become positive reference groups to the group in question (cf. Merton). The out-group may be emulated for purposes of becoming its member in future. Merton calls this anticipatory socialisation. Coser, however, believes that such may not be the case for the caste system where caste positions are fixed for life and there is little possibility of moving from one caste to another. M.N. Srinivas believes, however, that a ritually lower caste may try to adopt the rituals and life styles of higher castes in order to improve the position of the caste in the hierarchy of castes. This he calls the process of 'sanskritisation'.

The open class system, has bounded strata; some movement, both upward and downward is possible. Such mobility, in fact, is an ideal, although in practice there may not be substantial movement. In such a situation, hostility between classes is mixed with positive attraction to the higher classes. The sentiments of hostility towards higher classes do not necessarily mean rejection of the values of these groups but represent a 'sour grapes' attitude: 'that which is condemned is secretly coveted'.

7.3 CLASS CONFLICT

So far we have talked mainly about the feelings or sentiments of hostility towards other strata. Such negative feelings emerge due to the unequal distribution of privileges. At this stage it is desirable to distinguish between hostile sentiments, feelings or attitudes on one hand and conflict on the other. Conflict is an interaction between two or more persons or groups. Negative feelings or hostility do not necessarily lead to conflict interaction.

If this be so, then we may ask the question as to the conditions under which hostile feelings lead to their acting out in conflict. Coser believes that hostility between groups erupts in case unequal distribution of rights is not considered legitimate. The underprivileged group must first become aware that the rights and privileges to which it is entitled are being denied to it.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) What function does Coser see in hostility and conflict, write down your answer in about five lines.

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- 2) According to Coser conflict with other groups leads to
- i) integration and solidarity
 - ii) open hostilities
 - iii) disintegration
 - iv) revolution

In any system of inequality, an ideology upholding it is an invariable concomitant. The negatively privileged group must reject totally any such justificatory ideology. Only if such conscious rejection of legitimate order takes place can feelings be translated into action.

It should immediately occur to you that Coser's analysis of conflict interaction closely resembles that of Marx, especially the transformation of 'class-in-itself' to a 'class-for-itself'. Coser states that when social structures are no longer felt to be legitimate, individuals with similar objective positions will come, through conflict, and form self-conscious groups which have similar interests. (You will see later that a similar position is taken by Dahrendorf also).

7.4 R. DAHRENDORF

One of the major contributions to a study of classes and class conflicts has come from Ralf Dahrendorf, a German sociologist, in his seminal work 'Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society'. This work is based on a reasoned critique of Marx's writings on class. What Dahrendorf has done is to initially show which of Marx's formulations are tenable and which untenable and then go on to provide a theory of class, class conflict and structured change.

In this section we shall briefly look at his contribution.

7.4.1 Capitalism and Industrial Society

One of the first issues which Dahrendorf has taken up for analysis is the nature of capitalism and the classes within it. He has shown that capitalism merely signifies one form of industrial society. The two main elements of capitalism for Marx are private property in means of production and regulation of productive process by private contract (or management or initiative). In other words essentially a combination of private ownership and factual control of the instrument of production.

Marx's analysis of classes and class conflicts is based on the above mentioned characteristics of capitalism. If it can be shown that there are no more operative, than his theory is of little value today.

7.4.2 Decomposition of Capital Stock

The emergence and spread on a wide scale of joint stock companies raise serious questions about ownership and control of industrial enterprises with which Marx was concerned. The roles of owner and manager, originally combined in the position of capitalist, have been separated—stockholder i.e. owner, and executive. The owner does not have a defined role in the authority structure of the organisation and those who have it do not necessarily own capital.

The legitimacy of managerial authority stems not from ownership but from the bureaucratic organisation itself. The effect of this development on class conflict includes a change in the composition of groups participating in conflict, a change in the issues that cause conflict and also in the patterns of conflict.

7.4.3 Decomposition of Labour

Just as there has been a decomposition of capital, there has also been a decomposition of labour. Marx had believed that with the growth of capitalism the workers will become more and more unsullied, impoverished and homogeneous and will thus act in unison against a unified capitalist class. On the contrary, the workers have become more differentiated. Not only is there a sharp distinction between unskilled and semiskilled workers there is a growing proportion of highly skilled workers. Consequently the earnings and functions differ widely among them.

Let us also not forget the emergence of the new middle class—the white collar salaried employee. Although the salaried employee occupied a middle position in terms of income and prestige, from the point of a theory of conflict there can be no middle class. Where does it belong then in a relation of conflict? This is an important question because the name middle class is quite varied in its composition—from doctors and engineers on one hand and a clerk, office boy on the other. In a conflict situation which among them will be 'haves' and which 'have nots'? Dahrendorf believes that those in the bureaucratic hierarchy belong to ruling class and the white collar worker and others to the working class.

7.4.4 Social Mobility and Egalitarian Principles

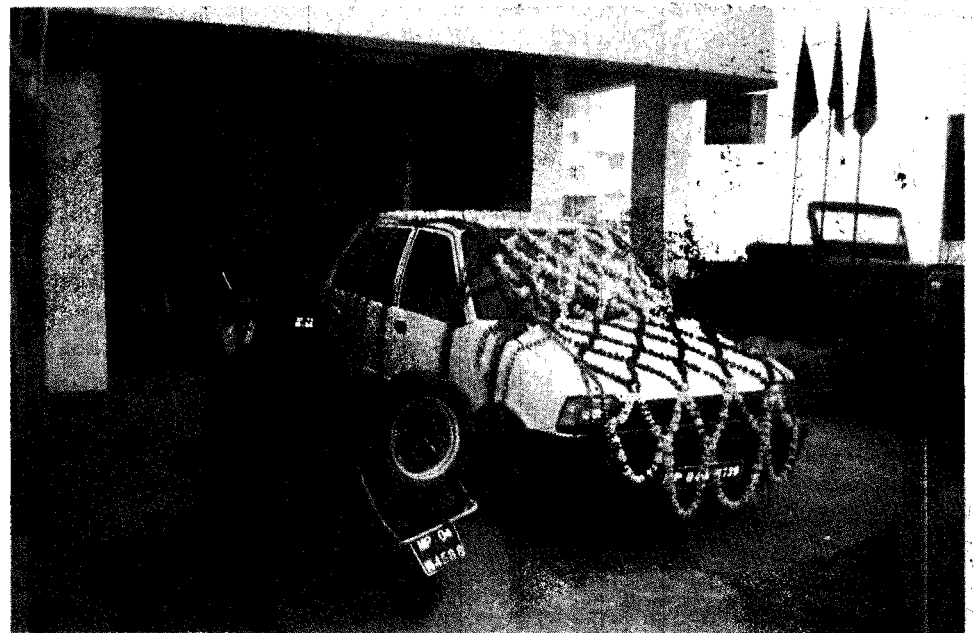
Apart from the decomposition of capital and labour and the emergence of a decomposed new middle class, social mobility has also militated against the homogenisation of classes. Marx had believed that the status an individual occupies in society is determined by his family origin and the position of his parents. In post capitalist societies this is not the case. There has been considerable social mobility both intergenerational as well as intra-generational. What this means for class composition is that the classes will be unstable. Hence the intensity of class conflict diminishes. While this is likely to be the case, let us not forget that it does not eliminate the possibility of class conflict.

Activity 2

How is the modern world different from Marx's ideas. Talk to people and note down your thoughts in your notebook.

Yet another important factor that has militated against the kind of class conflict engulfing the entire society which Marx had visualised, is the egalitarian principle in the political sphere. Freedom of association has allowed the trade unions and political parties to take up conflict resolution in other than the direction of violent class conflicts. Negotiated settlements in institutionalised frame work was possible. The working class, at least in the organised sector, has been able to secure considerable benefits.

To recapitulate the critique of Marx suggested by Dahrendorf: The predictions Marx had made about homogenisation of classes and the pauperisation of working class giving rise to intense and violent class conflicts has not been borne out by the historical developments, since his time. Three features are of particular importance. First, there has been decomposition of both labour and capital and a new middle class has emerged. Secondly, social mobility has made movement of individuals from one class to another possible. It works against the stability of classes, which in turn reduces the intensity of class conflict. Thirdly, equality in the political sphere has allowed class struggles to be carried out within institutionalised frame works and not necessarily through class wars. Since ownership of property and control are separated and the proletariat is decomposed we cannot visualise an entire society divided in two large warring camps. Classes and conflicts will remain in poor capitalist societies but their nature will be quite different from what Marx had formulated.



Marriage is one way in which mobility takes place

Courtesy: T. Kapur

7.5 TOWARDS A THEORY OF CLASS CONFLICT

Having shown the shortcomings of the applicability of Marx's theory of class conflict to Industrial societies, due to changed conditions Dahrendorf goes on then to suggest his own formulations on the subject.

In the theoretical corpus of sociology, there have been two distinct orientations. First is the Integration theory of society and second, the Coercion theory of society.

7.5.1 Basic Assumptions of Integration and Coercion Theories

The former is founded on four basic assumptions:

- i) Every society is a relatively persistent, stable structure of elements.
- ii) Every society is an ill integrated structure of elements.
- iii) Every element in a society has a function, i.e. renders contribution to its maintenance as a system.
- iv) Every functioning social structure is based on a consensus of values among its members.

The latter i.e. the Coercion theory also exhibits four levels:

- i) Every society is at every point subject to processes change; social change is ubiquitous.
- ii) Every society displays at every point dissensus and conflict; social conflict is ubiquitous.
- iii) Every element in a society renders a contribution to its disintegration and change.
- iv) Every society is based on the coercion of some if its members by others.

He considers both models as complementary rather than competing. For the explanation of formation of conflict groups the second model is appropriate. Given this assumption, Dahrendorf then goes on to provide a set of ideas in the form of propositions. Subsequent analysis and empirical verifications will be needed.

7.5.2 Dahrendorf's Theory

Let us examine the ideas contained in his 'Theory of Social Classes and Class Conflict'.

The objective of the exercise is an examination and explanation of structure changes in terms of group conflict. Since the primary interest is on conflict and its consequences, following the coercion model, it is taken as present throughout social structure i.e. ubiquitous. All the elements of the social structure e.g. roles, institutions norms have to do something or other with instability and change. [One may legitimately ask the counter question; How is there unity and coherence then? The answer will be: 'coercion and constraint'].

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) In which way does Dahrendorf's theory differ from that of Marx. Answer using about five lines.

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2) Say true or false.

- i) Marx advocated the decomposition of capital
- ii) Dahrendorf feels that class conflict will lead to revolution
- iii) Marx points out that capital leads to Imperatively Coordinated Associations
- iv) Class conflict has consequences for the social structure.

Every theory, however rudimentary it may be, uses a set of concepts which have to be clearly defined so that the statements showing the inter relationships can be clearly understood. Dahrendorf is one of the rare authors who has deliberately chosen to practice what the methodologists often preach but seldom practice.

Since it is a theory dealing with conflict concepts like power, authority have to find a place.

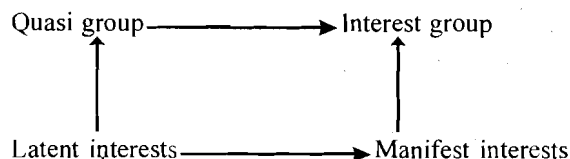
Following, Max Weber, Authority (i.e. legitimate power) then is the probability that an order with specific content will be obeyed by a given group of persons. Let it be emphasized that authority is confined to a specific organisation or group. The manager of factory 'A' cannot have authority over workers of factory 'B'. It is confined to his factory only.

Box 7.01

Those who have authority dominate others. Domination is possession of authority. Corollarily, exclusion from authority is subjection. Combining the elements of authority, domination and objection, the domain of enquiry, the imperatively coordinated association is defined. Any association in which live members are subject to authority relations will be called an Imperatively Coordinated Association, (I.C.A. will be used subsequently). It will show asymmetry of relations in terms of domination and subjection.

Following Marx's ideas on the existential basis of consciousness, class consciousness and fake class consciousness (cf "class-in-itself" and "class-for-itself") Dahrendorf distinguishes between latent and manifest interest.

Latent interests are those interests about which the incumbents of the two espousing positions of domination and subjection are unaware. In contrast the manifest interests are articulate and conscious to the individual and lead to opposition to the other. Corresponding to the two kind of interests, collectivities can be classified. The collectivity of individuals having common latent interests is called a quasi group, on the other hand, that which shares manifest interests is called interest groups.



(note that if latent interests become manifest due to structural dynamics of opposition, quasi groups become interest groups)

Having defined these terms Dahrendorf is now ready to define social class. (Remember that ownership will not figure in it as in Marx)

7.5.3 Dahrendorf on Social Class

Social classes then are such organised or unorganised collectivities which share latent or manifest interests which arise from the authority structure of imperatively coordinated associations (I.C.A.)

A few important points to note are:

- i) Social class does not encompass all or even most members of a society as a whole. It has relevance only for the given ICA.
- ii) Given the authority structure of an ICA of domination and subjection, only two classes are emergent.
- iii) Social classes are always conflict groups.

Group conflict is the antagonistic relationship between organised collectivities as is based on patterns of social structure. (Not random, not based on psychological factors). In a given I.C.A. class conflict which arises from the authority structure is endemic and ubiquitous. The presence and acting out of class conflict has consequences for structural change. This change can be in the social institutions and/or norms and values. Change can take place in varying degrees of suddenness or radicalness or both. (Note the departure from Marx formulation that structural change is always revolutionary i.e. sudden, radical and violent).

A model of conflict group formation. 'In very imperatively coordinated association, two quasi groups united by common latent interests can be distinguished. Their orientations of interest are determined by possession of or exclusion from authority. From these quasi groups, interest groups are recruited, the articulate programs of which defined or attack the legitimacy of existing authority structures. In any given association, two such groupings are in conflict'. (Dahrendorf, 1959: 183-84)

7.5.4 Consequences for Social Structure

Once conflict groups of the class type are formed in an I.C.A. i.e. in two opposing groups, how does the conflict interaction proceed? What will be the consequences for the social structure in which group conflict is rooted? There are the questions that any theory of conflict has to answer. Dahrendorf has attempted to do so.

To begin with one asks the question regarding the intensity of conflict (which involves 'costs' in case of defeat which factors affect it positively and negatively. Dahrendorf believes that the intensity of class conflict decreases to the extent that conditions for class organisation are present and vice versa. For example, if the workers have opportunities of forming unions and negotiate with management, the worker management conflicts will be less intense. Similarly in states where people can freely form parties and civic association will have less intense conflict, similarly, intensity of group conflict will diminish when the classes in different associations are not superimposed. For example the factory workers are also not from an ethnic minority or low caste. If there is superimposition of the two, the conflict will be more intense.

The intensity of class conflict is also affected by the fact of whether or not different group conflicts in the same society are dissociated. As an example let us suppose that there are three major kind of conflicts in a society: class conflict, ethnic conflict and regional, say, north-south conflict. If the incumbents of position of domination are also from dominant ethnic group and from the north, and those of subjection from a particular subordinate ethnic group and from the south, the intensity of class conflict will be very high.

Box 7.02

It is to be noted that if the distribution of rewards and of authority are dissociated, then also the intensity of class conflict will diminish. Although the exercise of authority and ownership of property tend to coincide, it need not necessarily be so. Those in authority may not own the means of production yet the workers may own shares in the company which employs them. Social mobility does influence the intensity of class conflict. It tends to decrease to the extent the classes are open and not closed. In a caste society where avenues of upward mobility are permanently closed, the intensity of conflict is likely to be higher than in an open class society. The caste conflicts in Bihar are a good example.

Having discussed the factors that affect the intensity of class conflict, Dahrendorf, then moves on to examine the variables affecting the violence of conflict. We have seen earlier, that he rejects Marx's position that all class conflicts are violent. It also does not mean that it is absent. What is believed is that the degree of violence varies from peaceful to bloody revolutionary conflict.

The conditions of class organisation prevalent in an ICA is negatively related to the violence of class conflict (cf unionisation and peaceful collective bargaining in a factory). Dahrendorf also believes that if relative deprivation replaces absolute deprivation in the subject classes, the violence of class conflict is reduced. Yet another factor affecting the degree of violence is the regulation of conflict. By regulation of conflict is meant the mechanisms and procedures that deal with the expression of conflict and not either with its resolution or suppression. To begin with, both parties must recognise that the conflict is real and necessary. Calling the other party's claim as 'unrealistic' is not regulation. It must be recognised that the 'other' has a case. Conflict regulation is more likely to occur when the opposing groups are organised as interest groups. In case of unorganised groups regulation is difficult. For example if there is only one workers' union in a factory, both the management and workers can work out effective strategies for dealing with the issues involved in conflict.

Finally, if both the parties agree on certain formal 'rules of the game', conflict is better regulated. As in most democratic countries of the world India has evolved procedures for industrial conflict regulation e.g. negotiations, mediations, arbitration and adjudication; strike being the last resort.

As class conflict takes place in an association, given its varying intensity and violence, it has consequences for the structure. Two kind of structure changes have been identified by Dahrendorf: suddenness and radicalness. The term structure change is to be applied when there are changes in the personnel of positions of domination and subjection in I.C.A.s. An extreme case will be when all the positions of authority are taken over by members of the erstwhile subject class, such as for example, in a revolution. More often than not, however, there is partial replacement.

By radicalness of structure change is meant the significance of consequences and ramifications of such change. It should be noted that many sudden changes may not necessarily be radical. For example a coup de tat by one general against another will bring about considerable changes in personnel, but will heavily change either the institutional or the normative order prevalent in the state.

7.6 LET US SUM UP

The 'Grand Theory' of Marx with its global vision and revolutionary zeal has had strong emotional reactions both positive and negative. It has changed the course of human history. Over the years however there has been a quiet dispassionate examination of his writings.

Marx's vision of total social transformation of the inequitous, inhuman capitalist system by a revolutionary well organised working class hasn't really worked out. The concepts of class and class conflict that he had used have had tremendous impact, in social sciences. Many scholars adopted them in their entirety; some with modification.

Both Coser and Dahrendorf belong to the later category. Both of them see the significance of class, but not its nature. The entire society may not be divided in two warring classes. They are 'groups' in a society having interests which are opposed to those of other groups. Conflict is not merely positional, it is interactive; not only structural but also processual. It also has a psychological counterpart in interest, consciousness, and in emotional costs. Finally, it has consequences for the social structure. These may be both positive and negative. They may tend to stabilize the given structure or to change it in various ways. It depends upon a number of variables which may be empirically operating.

7.7 KEY WORDS

- Capitalism** : The system in which there are owners of the means of production and the workers. This leads to an exploitation of the latter by the former.
- Conflict** : The opposing stance and action of two or more antagonistic groups
- Egalitarian** : The principle that each individual/group must have equal status and opportunity.
- Decomposition** : The breaking down of a class or group into smaller groups, e.g. that of labour and capital based groups.
- Function** : The part a component plays in the integration of a whole e.g. the part economy plays in integrating society.

7.8 FURTHER READINGS

Coser, A. 1956. *Function of Social Conflict*. London. Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Dahrendorf, R. 1959. *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society*. London. Routledge and Kegan Paul.

7.9 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Conflict has several functions. Firstly conflict with other groups leads to integration and solidarity within the same group. Further the whole system is maintained by what may be termed as a balance of aversions the groups have for the another. However sometimes what happens is that an out group(s) instead of creating a hostile response actually becomes a positive reference group. This is called anticipatory socialization, and has been stressed even in the caste system through the process termed 'Sanskritization'.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) The theory of Marx predicts revolutionary change due to polarization of classes in the system of capitalism. Dahrendorf points out due to decomposition of labour and capital, and due to social mobility such a revolution and polarization of classes will not occur. Thus industrial society defuses the tensions through the various processes mentioned above.
- 2) i) False
ii) False
iii) False
iv) True.