1.3C: The Conflict Perspective

Conflict theory sees society as a dynamic entity constantly undergoing change as a result of competition over scarce resources.

Learning Objectives

• Identify the tenets of and contributors to conflict theory, as well as the criticisms made against it

Key Points

• Conflict theory sees social life as a competition, and focuses on the distribution of resources, power, and inequality.
• Unlike functionalist theory, conflict theory is better at explaining social change, and weaker at explaining social stability.
• Conflict theory has been critiqued for its inability to explain social stability and incremental change.
• Conflict theory derives from the ideas of Karl Marx.

Key Terms

• conflict theory: A social science perspective that holds that stratification is dysfunctional and harmful in society, with inequality perpetuated because it benefits the rich and powerful at the expense of the poor.
• functionalism: Structural functionalism, or simply functionalism, is a framework for building theory that sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability.
The Conflict Perspective

The conflict perspective, or conflict theory, derives from the ideas of Karl Marx, who believed society is a dynamic entity constantly undergoing change driven by class conflict. Whereas functionalism understands society as a complex system striving for equilibrium, the conflict perspective views social life as competition. According to the conflict perspective, society is made up of individuals competing for limited resources (e.g., money, leisure, sexual partners, etc.). Competition over scarce resources is at the heart of all social relationships. Competition, rather than consensus, is characteristic of human relationships. Broader social structures and organizations (e.g., religions, government, etc.) reflect the competition for resources and the inherent inequality competition entails; some people and organizations have more resources (i.e., power and influence), and use those resources to maintain their positions of power in society.

C. Wright Mills is known as the founder of modern conflict theory. In his work, he believes social structures are created because of conflict between differing interests. People are then impacted by the creation of social structures, and the usual result is a differential of power between the “elite” and the “others”. Examples of the “elite” would be government and large corporations. G. William Domhoff believes in a similar philosophy as Mills and has written about the “power elite of America”.

Sociologists who work from the conflict perspective study the distribution of resources, power, and inequality. When studying a social institution or phenomenon, they ask, “Who benefits from this element of society?”

Conflict Theory and Change

While functionalism emphasizes stability, conflict theory emphasizes change. According to the conflict perspective, society is constantly in conflict over resources, and that conflict drives social change. For example, conflict theorists might explain the civil rights movements of the 1960s by studying how activists challenged the racially unequal distribution of political power and economic resources. As in this example, conflict theorists generally see social change as abrupt, even revolutionary, rather than incremental. In the conflict perspective, change comes about through conflict between competing interests, not consensus or adaptation. Conflict theory, therefore, gives sociologists a framework for explaining social change, thereby addressing one of the problems with the functionalist perspective.

Criticism of Conflict Theory

Predictably, conflict theory has been criticized for its focus on change and neglect of social stability. Some critics acknowledge that societies are in a constant state of change, but point out that much of the change is minor or incremental, not revolutionary. For example, many modern capitalist states have avoided a communist revolution, and have instead instituted elaborate social service programs. Although conflict theorists often focus on social change, they have, in fact, also developed a theory to explain social stability. According to the conflict perspective, inequalities in power and reward are built into all social structures. Individuals and groups who benefit from any particular structure strive to see it maintained. For example, the wealthy may fight to maintain their privileged access to higher education by opposing measures that would broaden access, such as affirmative action or public funding.