

*Key Concepts*  
**Social Structure and Anomie**

One of the best-known contributions to structural functionalism, indeed to all of sociology, is Merton's analysis of the relationship between culture, structure, and anomie. Merton defined culture as the organized set of normative values shared by those belonging to a group or society that govern their behavior. Social structure is the organized set of social relationships in which societal or group members are involved. **Anomie** can be said to have occurred when there is a serious disconnection between social structure and culture, between structurally created abilities of people to act in accord with cultural norms and goals and the norms and goals themselves. In other words, because of their position in the social structure of society, some people are unable to act in accord with normative values. The culture calls for some type of behavior that the social structure prevents from occurring.

In American society, for example, the culture places great emphasis on material success. However, many people are prevented, by their position within the social structure, from achieving such success. If one is born into the lower socioeconomic classes and as a result is able to acquire, at best, only a high school degree, then one's chances of achieving economic success in the generally accepted way (e.g., through succeeding in the conventional work world) are slim or nonexistent. Under such circumstances (and they are widespread in contemporary American society) anomie can be said to exist, and, as a result, there is a tendency toward deviant behavior. In this context, deviance often takes the form of alternative, unacceptable, and sometimes illegal means of achieving economic success. Becoming a drug dealer or a prostitute in order to achieve economic success is an example of deviance generated by the disjunction between cultural values and social-structural means of attaining those values. This is one way in which the structural functionalist would seek to explain crime and deviance.

In this example of structural functionalism, Merton is looking at social (and cultural) structures, but he is not focally concerned with the functions of those structures. Rather, consistent with his functional paradigm, he is mainly concerned with dysfunctions, in this case, anomie. More specifically, as we have seen, Merton links anomie with deviance and thereby is arguing that disjunctions between culture and structure have the dysfunctional consequence of leading to deviance within society.

It is worth noting that implied in Merton's work on anomie is a critical attitude toward social stratification (e.g., for blocking the means of some to achieve socially desirable goals). Thus, although Davis and Moore wrote approvingly of a stratified society, Merton's work indicates that structural functionalists can be critical of a structure like social stratification.

**anomie** To Merton, a situation in which there is a serious disconnection between social structure and culture; between structurally created abilities of people to act in accord with cultural norms and goals and the norms and goals themselves.

consequences. Slavery may have been instituted to help strengthen the South economically, but its unanticipated consequence was to slow industrialization and ultimately weaken that area from an economic point of view. Although everyone is aware of the intended consequences, sociological analysis is required to uncover the unintended consequences; indeed, to some this is the very essence of sociology. Peter Berger has called this **debunking**, or looking beyond stated intentions to real effects.

Merton made it clear that unanticipated consequences and latent functions are not the same. A latent function is one type of unanticipated consequence, one that is functional for the designated system. But there are two other types of unanticipated consequences: those that are dysfunctional and those that are irrelevant.

As further clarification of functional theory, Merton pointed out that a structure may be dysfunctional for the system as a whole and yet may continue to exist. One might make a good case that discrimination against blacks, females, and other minority groups is dysfunctional for American society; yet it continues to exist because it is functional for a part of the social system; for example, discrimination against females is generally functional for males. However, these forms of discrimination are not without some dysfunctions, even for the group for which they are functional. Males do suffer from their discrimination against females; similarly, whites are hurt by their discriminatory behavior toward blacks. One could argue that these forms of discrimination adversely affect those who discriminate by keeping vast numbers of people underproductive and by increasing the likelihood of social conflict.

Merton contended that not all structures are indispensable to the workings of the social system. Some parts of our social system *can* be eliminated. This helps functional theory overcome another of its conservative biases. By recognizing that some structures are expendable, structural functionalism opens the way for meaningful social change. Our society, for example, could continue to exist (and even be improved) by the elimination of discrimination against various minority groups.

Merton's clarifications are of great utility to sociologists who wish to perform structural-functional analyses.

## CONFLICT THEORY

Conflict theory can be seen as a development that took place, at least in part, in reaction to structural functionalism. However, it should be noted that conflict theory has other roots, such as Marxian theory and Georg Simmel's work on

**debunking** Looking beyond stated intentions to real effects.

### C. Wright Mills (1916–1962)

#### *A Biographical Vignette*

C. Wright Mills was not a great neo-Marxian theorist (he made no original contributions of his own to the theory), but he was a great critic of American society (and of American sociological theory, especially the theorizing of Talcott Parsons—see above) from a Marxian, or more generally leftist, perspective. He critiqued union leaders for being insufficiently radical and did not see the labor movement and the working class as truly revolutionary forces. He critiqued white collar workers for, among other things, their great concern for elevating their personal status and their resulting disinterest in larger social change. Most importantly, he saw a “power elite” (composed of an interlocking group of corporate leaders, government officials and military leaders) emerging in American society and he worried about the control they were exercising over society. But Mills made many other kinds of contributions to sociology, especially his idea of the “sociological imagination” and the need to think imaginatively about various social issues, especially the intersection between individual biography and social history, “character” and “social structure,” as well as “private troubles” and “public issues.”

Mills was not only a radical intellectually, but also personally. He generally refused to play the academic game according to the “gentlemanly” rules of the day (sociology was dominated by males in the mid-20th century). Beginning in graduate school, he attacked the professors in his department, and later in his career he took on senior theorists in that department (calling one a “real fool”), leaders of American sociological theory (such as Parsons), and the dominant survey research methods (and methodologists) in the field. Eventually he came to be estranged and isolated from his colleagues at Columbia University. Mills said of himself: “I am an outlander . . . down deep and good.”

However, Mills did not restrict his critiques to conservative and establishment elements in the U.S. Late in his life, Mills was invited to the Soviet Union and honored as a major critic of American society. Instead of meekly accepting the award, Mills took the occasion to attack censorship in the Soviet Union with a toast to a Soviet leader who had been purged and murdered by the Stalinists: “To the day when the complete works of Leon Trotsky are published in the Soviet Union!”

social conflict. In the 1950s and 1960s, conflict theory provided an alternative to structural functionalism, but it was superseded by a variety of neo-Marxian theories (see Chapter 5). Indeed, one of the major contributions of conflict theory was the way it laid the groundwork in the United States for theories more faithful to Marx’s work, theories that came to attract a wide audience in sociology. The basic problem with conflict theory is that it never succeeded in divorcing itself sufficiently from its structural-functional roots. It was more a kind of structural functionalism turned on its head than a truly critical theory of society. As such, conflict theory, like structural functionalism, offers a portrait of society, albeit one that is different in many ways.

### The Work of Ralf Dahrendorf

Like functionalists, conflict theorists are oriented toward the study of social structures and institutions. Conflict 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, 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 orderliness 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 view society as being held together informally by norms, values, and a common morality. Conflict theorists believe whatever order there is in society stems from the coercion of some members by those at the top. Whereas functionalists focus on the cohesion created by shared societal values, conflict theorists emphasize the role of power in maintaining order in society.

Dahrendorf was the major exponent of the position that society has two faces (conflict and consensus) and that sociological theory therefore should be divided into two components—conflict theory and consensus theory (one example of which is structural functionalism). 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 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. Eschewing a singular theory, Dahrendorf set out to construct a separate conflict theory of society.

Dahrendorf began with, and was heavily influenced by, structural functionalism. He noted that to the functionalist, the social system is held together by voluntary cooperation or general consensus or both. However, to the conflict (or coercion) theorist, society is held together by enforced constraint; thus, some positions in society are delegated power and authority over others. This fact of social life led Dahrendorf to his central thesis that systematic social conflicts are always caused by the differential distribution of authority.

## Ralf Dahrendorf (1929– )

### A Biographical Vignette

Ralf Dahrendorf is best known in sociology for his conflict theory, heavily influenced by Marxian theory. He has had quite an illustrious career as a public figure, culminating in being named Baron Dahrendorf in 1993 by Queen Elizabeth II.

Born in Hamburg, Germany, Dahrendorf has had a fascinating life. As a teenager, he resisted the Nazis and was imprisoned (as his father had been) for his opposition to that regime. He was released by an SS officer from the camp where he was imprisoned in early 1945 as the Russian army approached. He studied at the University of Hamburg and earned a doctorate there, as well as another from the London School of Economics. He taught in various German universities, and later became both a public intellectual and a public figure. Among the positions he held were Member of the German Parliament, Secretary of State in the German Foreign Office, Commissioner in the European Commission in Brussels, and Director of the London School of Economics. He became a British citizen in 1988.

While his conflict theory was influenced by Marxian ideas, Dahrendorf was never a Marxist. He describes himself as a liberal. Nevertheless, he has been strongly influenced by the Marxian notion of integrating theory and practice. In fact, he has led a life in which he has developed theory and applied it to practical matters in academia and, more importantly, in the larger society.

## Authority

Dahrendorf (like societal functionalists) concentrated on larger social structures. Central to his thesis is the idea that various positions within society have different amounts of authority. Authority does not reside in individuals but in positions. Dahrendorf was interested not only in the structure of these positions but also in the conflict among them. The structural origin of these conflicts is to be traced to the relationship between positions that possess authority and those that are subject to that authority. The first task of conflict analysis, to Dahrendorf, was to identify various authority roles within society. In addition to making the case for the study of large-scale structures like systems of authority roles, Dahrendorf was opposed to those who focus on the individual level. For example, he was critical of those who focus on the psychological or behavioral characteristics of the individuals who occupy such positions. He went so far as to say that those who adopted such an approach were not sociologists.

The authority attached to positions is the key element in Dahrendorf's analysis. Authority always implies both superordination and subordination. Those who occupy positions of authority are expected to control subordinates; that is, they dominate because of the expectations of those who surround them, not because of their own psychological characteristics. Like authority, these expectations are attached to positions, not people. Authority is not a generalized

social phenomenon; those who are subject to control, as well as permissible spheres of control, are specified in society. Finally, because authority is legitimate, sanctions can be brought to bear against those who do not comply.

Authority is not a constant as far as Dahrendorf was concerned, because authority resides in positions and not persons. Thus, a person with authority in one setting does not necessarily hold a position of authority in another setting. Similarly, a person in a subordinate position in one group may be in a superordinate position in another. This follows from Dahrendorf's argument that society is composed of a number of units that he called **imperatively coordinated associations**. These may be seen as associations of people controlled by a hierarchy of authority positions. Since society contains many such associations, an individual can occupy a position of authority in one and a subordinate position in another.

Authority within each association is dichotomous; thus two, and only two, conflict groups can be formed within any association. Those in positions of authority and those in positions of subordination hold contrary interests. Here we encounter another key term in Dahrendorf's theory of conflict: **interests**. Groups on top and at the bottom are defined by their common concerns. Dahrendorf continued to be firm in his thinking that even these interests, which sound so psychological, are basically large-scale phenomena; that is, interests are linked to social positions and *not* to the psychological characteristics of those individuals who occupy those positions.

Within every association, those in dominant positions seek to maintain the status quo while those in subordinate positions seek change. A conflict of interest within any association is at least latent at all times, which means that the legitimacy of authority is *always* precarious. This conflict of interest need not be conscious in order for superordinates or subordinates to act on it. The interests of superordinates and subordinates are objective in the sense that they are reflected in the expectations (roles) attached to positions. Individuals do not have to internalize these expectations or even be conscious of them in order to act in accord with them. If they occupy given positions, then they will behave in the expected manner. Individuals are adjusted or adapted to their roles when they contribute to conflict between superordinates and subordinates. Dahrendorf called these unconscious concerns **latent interests**. **Manifest interests** are latent interests that have become conscious. Dahrendorf viewed the analysis of the connection between latent and manifest interests as a major task of conflict theory. Nevertheless, actors need not be conscious of their interests in order to act in accord with them.

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**imperatively coordinated associations** Associations of people controlled by a hierarchy of authority positions.

**interests** Concerns, usually shared by groups of people.

**latent interests** Unconscious interests that translate, for Dahrendorf, into objective role expectations.

**manifest interests** Latent interests of which people have become conscious.

## Key Concepts

**The Functions of Social Conflict**

While structural functionalism and conflict theory are discussed separately, and are at odds with one another in many ways, it is possible to discuss them together. In this box we do just that by discussing the functions of social conflict.

Conflict may serve to solidify a loosely structured group. In a society that seems to be disintegrating, conflict with another society may restore the integrative core. The cohesiveness of Israeli Jews might be attributed, at least in part, to the long-standing conflict with the Arab nations in the Middle East. The possible end of the conflict might well exacerbate underlying strains in Israeli society. Conflict as an agent for solidifying a society is an idea that has long been recognized by propagandists, who may construct an enemy where none exists or seek to fan antagonisms toward an inactive opponent.

Conflict with one group may serve to produce cohesion by leading to a series of alliances with other groups. For example, conflict with the Arabs has led to an alliance between the United States and Israel. Lessening of the Israeli-Arab conflict might weaken the bonds between Israel and the United States.

Within a society, conflict can bring some ordinarily isolated individuals into an active role. The protests over the Vietnam war motivated many young people to take vigorous roles in American political life for the first time. With the end of that conflict a more apathetic spirit emerged again among American youth.

Conflict also serves a communication function. Prior to conflict, groups may be unsure of their adversary's position, but as a result of conflict, positions and boundaries between groups often become clarified. Individuals therefore are better able to decide on a proper course of action in relation to their adversary. Conflict also allows the parties to get a better idea of their relative strengths and may well increase the possibility of rapprochement, or peaceful accommodation.

From a theoretical perspective, it is possible to wed functionalism and conflict theory by looking at the functions of social conflict. Still, it must be recognized that conflict also has dysfunctions.

**Groups, Conflict, and Change**

Next, Dahrendorf distinguished three broad types of groups. The first is the **quasi group**, or a number of individuals who occupy positions that have the same role interests. These are the recruiting grounds for the second type of group: the **interest group**. Interest groups are true groups in the sociological sense of the term, possessing not only common interests but also a structure, a

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**quasi group** A number of individuals who occupy positions that have the same role interests.

**interest group** Unlike quasi groups, interest groups are true groups in the sociological sense of the term, possessing not only common interests, but also a structure, a goal, and personnel. Interest groups have the capacity to engage in group conflict.

goal, and personnel. Interest groups have the capacity to engage in group conflict. Out of all the many interest groups emerge **conflict groups**, those groups that actually engage in conflict.

Dahrendorf felt that the concepts of latent and manifest interests, of quasi groups, interest groups, and conflict groups, were basic to an explanation of social conflict. Under *ideal* conditions no other variables would be needed. However, because conditions are never ideal, many different factors do intervene in the process. Dahrendorf mentioned technical conditions such as adequate personnel, political conditions such as the overall political climate, and social conditions such as the existence of communication links. The way people are recruited into the quasi group was another social condition important to Dahrendorf. He felt that if the recruitment is random and determined by chance, then an interest group, and ultimately a conflict group, is unlikely to emerge. In contrast to Marx, Dahrendorf did not feel that the **lumpenproletariat** (the mass of people who stand below even the proletariat in the capitalist system) would ultimately form a conflict group, because people are recruited to it by chance. However, when recruitment to quasi groups is structurally determined, these groups provide fertile recruiting grounds for interest groups and, in some cases, conflict groups.

The final aspect of Dahrendorf's conflict theory is the relationship of conflict to change. Here Dahrendorf recognized the importance of Lewis Coser's work, which focused on the functions of conflict in maintaining the status quo. Dahrendorf felt, however, that the conservative function of conflict is only one part of social reality; conflict also leads to change and development.

Briefly, Dahrendorf argued that once conflict groups emerge, they engage in actions that lead to changes in social structure. When the conflict is intense, the changes that occur are radical. When it is accompanied by violence, structural change will be sudden. Whatever the nature of conflict, sociologists must be attuned to the relationship between conflict and change as well as that between conflict and the status quo. In other words, they must be sensitized to the dynamic relationships among the various elements involved in this portrait of society. Thus, theoretical portraits need not necessarily be static. This idea is even clearer in the next section on system theory.

**GENERAL SYSTEM THEORY<sup>1</sup>****The Work of Niklas Luhmann**

The most prominent system theorist in sociology was Niklas Luhmann (1927–1998). Luhmann developed a sociological approach that combined elements of Talcott Parsons's structural functionalism with general systems theory

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**conflict group** A group that actually engages in group conflict.

**lumpenproletariat** The mass of people who stand below even the proletariat in the capitalist system.