

## Conflict Theory

Conflict theorists stand in *sharp contrast* to functionalists in terms of their basic approach. According to conflict theorists, society is in a state of perpetual disequilibrium, yet it is maintained as a cohesive body by powerful social groups that *coerce* **cooperation** from the less powerful. They view society as divided into dominant and subordinate groups, characterized by a constant **power struggle** between them. It is not necessary for different units to operate in a way that maintains the solidarity of the whole society; rather, there is an ever-present possibility of social instability.

One of the central claims of conflict theory is that change is an inevitable and normal characteristic of any society. Social structures, **norms**, and institutions are not static; rather, they evolve in response to conflicts and the shifting balance of power. The factors driving conflict can be both internal and external, ranging from personal disputes to broader societal issues such as racial inequality, **gender discrimination**, or economic disparities. Conflict can occur at various levels, from interpersonal relationships to global dynamics. For instance, labor disputes highlight class-based conflicts, while civil rights movements underscore struggles against systemic inequality. External factors, such as geopolitical rivalries or environmental crises, can also exacerbate tensions within societies.

The effects of conflict on society are multifaceted. Conflict can lead to positive outcomes, such as **social reforms**, increased awareness of injustices, and the dismantling of oppressive systems. For example, the women's suffrage movement and the civil rights movement were born out of conflict and resulted in significant societal progress. On the other hand, conflict can also have negative consequences, such as **social fragmentation**, violence, and prolonged instability. The impacts of conflict can be both latent (hidden or unintended) and manifest (visible and intentional). For example, a strike may aim to improve workers' rights (manifest), but it may also lead to economic disruption (latent).

Despite its strengths, conflict theory is not without criticism. Some argue that it overemphasizes power struggles and underestimates the role of shared values and cooperation

in maintaining social order. Critics also contend that conflict theory may be overly **deterministic**, portraying individuals and groups as locked in perpetual antagonism with limited **agency** to transcend structural inequalities. Nevertheless, conflict theory remains a foundational perspective in sociology, providing valuable insights into the dynamics of power, **inequality**, and social change.