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Conflict Theory: A Review of Core Themes and Theoretical Contributions

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ABSTRACT

This review article examines the evolution, foundational concepts, and contemporary relevance of conflict theory as articulated by classical and modern sociological theorists. Originating with Karl Marx's analysis of class struggle and economic inequality, conflict theory has since expanded through the contributions of Max Weber, C. Wright Mills, Ralf Dahrendorf, and others who emphasized power dynamics, authority, and institutional control. The paper synthesizes key theoretical developments and core themes such as social stratification, ideological dominance, and the role of conflict in driving social change. By applying the theory to present-day issues such as educational inequality, mass incarceration, healthcare disparities, and media control, the article highlights its utility in critiquing systemic injustice. The review concludes by outlining future directions for conflict theory, including intersectional analysis, decolonial perspectives, and ecological conflict. Through this comprehensive synthesis, the paper affirms the enduring significance of conflict theory in the sociological analysis of power and inequality.

Keywords: Conflict Theory, Karl Marx, Power, Inequality, Class, Social Change.

Introduction

Conflict theory remains one of the most influential paradigms in sociology, offering a critical lens through which to analyze social structures, power relations, and systemic inequalities (Robbins & Leibowitz, 2021). Originally grounded in the writings of Karl Marx, the theory centres on the idea that society is in a constant state of tension and struggle due to competition over scarce resources, particularly between dominant and subordinate classes (Marx & Engels, 1848; 1977). According to Marx, this class conflict rooted in the capitalist mode of production is the driving force of historical and social change (Nazir & Nazir, 2024). Over time, however, conflict theory has evolved significantly, incorporating broader perspectives beyond economic class. Max Weber (1922; 1978) expanded the framework by introducing the role of status groups, authority structures, and the multidimensional nature of power. In the 20th century, theorists such as C. Wright Mills (1956) and Ralf Dahrendorf

(1959) further developed conflict theory by applying it to contemporary institutional power dynamics, emphasizing how elites maintain control through political, bureaucratic, and cultural means.

In the modern era, conflict theory has been revitalized to address contemporary global issues such as racial injustice, gender inequality, and institutionalized power in education, healthcare, and criminal justice systems (Collins, 2022; Young, 2023). As a result, conflict theory is no longer viewed as a monolithic perspective but rather as a dynamic and pluralistic framework shaped by diverse intellectual contributions. This review aims to synthesize the core themes of conflict theory by examining the perspectives of key sociological theorists, copying its evolution from classical Marxism to contemporary critiques, and exploring its enduring relevance in analyzing structural inequalities in today's world.

Significance of the Study

This review paper holds significant scholarly and practical value in the field of sociology by providing a comprehensive synthesis of Conflict Theory as articulated by major classical and contemporary sociologists. By integrating the perspectives of Karl Marx, Max Weber, C. Wright Mills, Ralf Dahrendorf, and others, the study offers a holistic understanding of how conflict shapes social structures, institutions, and power relations (Raza, 2024). The significance lies not only in revisiting foundational theoretical debates but also in contextualizing them within modern societal issues such as economic inequality, racial and gender disparities, educational access, media control, and institutionalized power (Jia, 2024). This paper bridges historical theoretical frameworks with contemporary applications, making it a valuable resource for educators, students, and policymakers aiming to understand or challenge structural inequalities. Furthermore, by highlighting the evolution of conflict theory from class-based struggles to intersectional and global dynamics, this paper encourages future research that is more inclusive, critical, and responsive to today's complex social realities. In doing so, it reinforces the enduring relevance of conflict theory as a vital lens for analyzing systemic injustice and guiding transformative social change.

Methodology

This article employs a narrative review methodology to synthesize key contributions to conflict theory across classical, modern, and contemporary sociological literature. Rather than conducting a systematic or meta-analytic review, this approach emphasizes thematic exploration and critical interpretation of major theoretical texts and peer-reviewed works.

The selection of theorists and literature was guided by the following criteria: historical significance (e.g., Marx, Weber, Mills), influence on the development of conflict theory, inclusion of diverse perspectives (such as feminist, intersectional, and global viewpoints), and relevance to contemporary applications in education, justice, media, and health.

Sources include primary theoretical texts, seminal sociological publications, and recent academic journal articles (2020–2024) that illustrate evolving interpretations and critiques. A comparative thematic analysis was used to identify recurring concepts such as power, inequality, and resistance and to track their transformation over time. This methodology allows for a comprehensive and flexible synthesis, accommodating both classical foundations and newer theoretical expansions of conflict theory.

Contributions of Key Sociological Theorists to Conflict Theory

1. Karl Marx: The Foundation of Conflict Theory

Karl Marx laid the foundational principles of conflict theory through his critique of capitalism and historical materialism. Marx argued that society is fundamentally divided into two opposing classes: the bourgeoisie, who own the means of production, and the proletariat, who sell their labour to survive (Marx & Engels, 1848; 1977). According to Marx, this economic conflict is inherent and irreconcilable, leading inevitably to class struggle, revolution, and the reorganization of society.

He introduced the concept of alienation, where workers are estranged from their labour, products, and sense of self under capitalist exploitation. For Marx, societal institutions; law, education, religion serve to maintain the dominance of the ruling class by reinforcing ideological control (Marx, 1990). Thus, Marx's analysis views conflict not as an anomaly but as the engine of historical and social transformation.

2. Max Weber: Expanding Conflict Beyond Class

While Weber acknowledged the significance of class, he argued that social conflict is multidimensional. He introduced a more nuanced framework involving class, status, and party (Weber, 1922; 1978). For Weber, power does not stem solely from economic control but also from social prestige and political influence. His analysis of bureaucracy showed how rational-legal authority could produce new forms of domination that are stable yet dehumanizing.

Weber's contribution moved conflict theory beyond economic determinism by demonstrating how legitimacy, ideology, and organizational structures play central roles in maintaining power imbalances (Gerth & Mills, 1946). This widened the applicability of conflict theory to areas like politics, religion, and law.

3. C. Wright Mills: The Power Elite

C. Wright Mills (1956) built on both Marx and Weber to develop a contemporary critique of American society. In *The Power Elite*, Mills argued that a small group of militaries, political, and corporate leaders controls the major institutions in modern society. These elites operate behind the scenes, making decisions that shape national policies and public opinion, often without democratic accountability.

Mills emphasized the interconnectedness of institutional power, showing how corporate interests influence politics and media. His analysis remains crucial for understanding how systemic inequality persists in democratic societies through elite consensus and social inertia (Domhoff, 2022).

4. Ralf Dahrendorf: Conflict in Modern Authority Structures

Ralf Dahrendorf (1959) reformulated conflict theory by integrating it with structural-functionalism. He argued that modern societies are characterized by conflict over authority, not merely class. According to Dahrendorf, authority is embedded in social positions and institutional roles, creating constant tensions between those who hold power and those subject to it.

Unlike Marx, Dahrendorf saw conflict as a permanent and necessary feature of society, not merely transitional. His work was instrumental in legitimizing conflict theory within mainstream sociology and moving it beyond economic reductionism.

5. Contemporary Theorists: Conflict in Diverse Contexts

In recent decades, theorists like Randall Collins (2022) and Lewis Coser (1956) have contributed micro-level analyses of conflict. Collins applies conflict theory to everyday interactions, such as educational inequality and professional competition, while Coser

explored how social conflict can have positive effects, such as promoting change, innovation, and solidarity within groups.

Modern feminist, postcolonial, and critical race theorists have also adapted conflict theory to analyze intersectional inequalities. For instance, Patricia Hill Collins (2019) applies a conflict lens to the matrix of domination involving race, gender, and class in African American women's experiences. These perspectives have extended conflict theory into new domains, making it a flexible and intersectional framework for analyzing oppression.

Core Themes Across Theorists in Conflict Theory

Despite the diversity of perspectives among theorists like Karl Marx, Max Weber, C. Wright Mills, Ralf Dahrendorf, and more contemporary scholars, certain core themes consistently emerge within the broader conflict theory framework. These shared concepts form the backbone of the theory and allow it to be applied across different social contexts and disciplines.

1. Power and Inequality

At the heart of conflict theory is the belief that power is unevenly distributed in society and that this imbalance drives social relations, institutions, and historical change. Whether Marx's economic determinism or Weber's multidimensional view of power, theorists agree that those who control resources; whether capital, political authority, or social prestige; work to preserve their dominance (Weber, 1978; Mills, 1956).

This theme is also central in feminist and race-critical adaptations of conflict theory, where power is analyzed not just economically but through patriarchy, racism, colonialism, and other axes of domination (Collins P. H., 2019; Hooks, 1981).

2. Class and Social Stratification

Marx's theory of class conflict remains a foundational element, with later theorists adapting it to modern contexts. Conflict theory continues to emphasize the division of society into hierarchical groups, particularly the privileged and the marginalized, and how these groups compete for access to resources, education, healthcare, and influence (Dahrendorf, 1959; Domhoff, 2022).

Contemporary sociology often builds on this by analyzing how class intersects with race, gender, and citizenship to produce compounded forms of disadvantage (Young, 2023).

3. Authority, Domination, and Legitimacy

From Weber's analysis of bureaucratic power to Dahrendorf's focus on authority structures, conflict theory highlights how systems of domination are maintained and justified. Institutions are not neutral; they are structured to uphold existing hierarchies through laws, norms, and ideologies that appear legitimate to the public (Gerth & Mills, 1946; Dahrendorf, 1959).

This theme extends to critiques of the state, law enforcement, and education systems, which often serve as tools for reinforcing elite interests under the guise of neutrality or meritocracy.

4. Ideology and Social Control

Conflict theorists often argue that dominant classes or groups use ideology to maintain control (Crossman, 2021), shaping cultural norms, media narratives, and public discourse to legitimize their position. Marx called this "false consciousness," where the working class is misled into accepting the status quo (Marx & Engels, 1848; 1977).

Mills (1956) and Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 1971) further emphasize how elites manipulate societal beliefs, discouraging collective resistance.

5. Conflict as a Driver of Social Change

Rather than viewing conflict as pathological or destructive, conflict theorists see it as inherent and necessary for social progress. According to this view, tension and resistance are not only expected but desirable because they expose injustices and catalyze transformation (Coser, 1956; Collins R. , 2022).

Even when conflict leads to instability or violence, it is often framed as the mechanism through which outdated or unjust systems are challenged and replaced with more equitable ones (Ide, et al., 2023).

6. Institutional Reproduction of Inequality

Modern conflict theory pays close attention to how inequality is systemically reproduced through institutions such as schools, corporations, and the criminal justice system. These institutions often appear neutral but function to reproduce social hierarchies over generations (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Collins P. H., 2022). This institutional focus is evident in the works of theorists who study structural racism, gender bias in education, and mass incarceration (Harvey, 2023).

Table-1 Themes of conflict theory

S. No	Theme	Key Contributors	Focus
1.	Power and Inequality	Marx, Weber, Mills, Collins	Unequal access and control
2.	Class & Stratification	Marx, Dahrendorf, Domhoff	Group-based hierarchy
3.	Authority & Legitimacy	Weber, Dahrendorf	Institutional power
4.	Ideology & Control	Marx, Mills, Gramsci	Cultural dominance
5.	Conflict & Social Change	Marx, Coser, Collins	Positive function of conflict
6.	Institutional Reproduction	Bowles & Gintis, Collins	Education, justice, media systems

Applications of Conflict Theory in Contemporary Society

Conflict theory, with its focus on inequality, power struggles, and systemic domination, provides a powerful analytical tool for examining various sectors of modern life. From education and law to healthcare and media, conflict theory helps uncover how social institutions perpetuate disparities and reinforce structural hierarchies.

1. Education: Reproducing Class and Cultural Inequality

Educational systems, often seen as neutral platforms for opportunity, are critically examined through the lens of conflict theory. Sociologists like Bowles and Gintis (1976) argue that schools function as instruments of cultural reproduction, transmitting the values and expectations of dominant social classes. Students from marginalized backgrounds are systematically tracked into lower-performing streams, receive fewer resources, and are prepared for subordinate roles in the labour force.

Moreover, hidden curricula the unwritten norms and expectations in schools reinforce obedience, conformity, and the existing status quo. Conflict theorists view this not as accidental, but as a deliberate function of the educational system to maintain elite control (Apple, 2019).

2. Criminal Justice: Institutionalized Inequality

Conflict theory also plays a major role in analyzing the criminal justice system. It highlights how laws are often created and enforced to protect the interests of the powerful while criminalizing the behaviours of the poor and marginalized (Gustafson, 2008). Wealthy individuals are more likely to escape harsh punishment, while disadvantaged groups face higher rates of arrest, conviction, and incarceration.

The disproportionate policing of Black and minority communities, for example, is seen by conflict theorists as a reflection of racialized power structures embedded in law enforcement and judicial institutions (Alexander, 2020). Prisons, in this view, become tools for social control, not rehabilitation.

3. Healthcare: Unequal Access and Outcomes

In healthcare, conflict theory reveals the unequal distribution of care, resources, and health outcomes. Access to quality healthcare often depends on one's social class, race, gender, and geographic location (Elias & Paradies, 2021). The commodification of health services under capitalist systems means that those without economic means face systemic neglect, while the elite enjoy high-quality, preventative care (Waitzkin, 2000).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, conflict theorists pointed out how marginalized groups were more exposed to the virus, suffered worse outcomes, and had less access to vaccination demonstrating structural inequities in real time (Ahmed, Ahmed, Azeem, & Saeed, 2021).

4. Media: Control of Narratives

Mass media is another arena where conflict theory is actively applied. It reveals how dominant groups shape public discourse by controlling what is broadcast, published, or omitted (Kuo & Marwick, 2021). Ownership of media outlets by a few elite corporations allows them to shape narratives that protect capitalist interests and marginalize dissenting voices (Herman & Chomsky, 2021).

Through selective coverage, agenda-setting, and framing, the media perpetuates ideologies that align with elite power such as consumerism, nationalism, or racial stereotypes while delegitimizing movements for justice or structural change.

5. Gender and Racial Inequality: Intersectional Applications

Modern scholars have extended conflict theory using intersectionality, a concept that explores how various forms of oppression (race, gender, class) intersect and compound (Hussain, Usman, & Junaid, 2025). Feminist theorists like bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins have shown how patriarchy and white supremacy work alongside class-based oppression to limit the life chances of women and people of colour (Collins P. H., 2019; Hooks, 1981).

These adaptations of conflict theory move beyond binary class struggle to address how multiple systems of domination operate simultaneously and reinforce one another in everyday life.

Critiques and Limitations of Conflict Theory

While conflict theory offers a powerful framework for analyzing power structures and inequality, it has also faced several critiques and limitations from within and outside the discipline of sociology. These critiques highlight both theoretical weaknesses and practical challenges in applying the theory across diverse social contexts.

1. Overemphasis on Conflict and Neglect of Stability

One of the most frequently cited limitations is conflict theory's tendency to overemphasize discord, struggle, and inequality, often at the expense of understanding social cohesion, stability, and cooperation. Critics argue that by focusing almost exclusively on conflict and domination, the theory overlooks the functions of shared values, norms, and institutions that maintain order and facilitate collective action (Holahan & Lubell, 2022). This one-sided perspective can result in a distorted view of society as being constantly at war, ignoring the possibility of consensus and reform.

2. Economic Reductionism (in Classical Marxism)

Another common critique, particularly of classical Marxist conflict theory, is economic determinism, the idea that all aspects of social life, including culture, religion, politics, and education, are ultimately rooted in and determined by economic relations. While this perspective reveals important links between economic systems and social structures, it often fails to account for non-economic sources of power and identity, such as race, gender, ethnicity, and ideology (Weber, 1978). This reductionism limits the theory's ability to explain complex and intersectional forms of oppression.

3. Underdeveloped View of Agency

Critics have also pointed out that conflict theory often presents individuals, especially those in subordinate groups, as passive victims of domination, rather than active agents capable of resistance, negotiation, or adaptation. This neglect of individual and collective agency can lead to deterministic conclusions that underestimate the possibility of grassroots change, innovation, or reconciliation within society (Endo, 2024).

4. Lack of Predictive Power

Unlike some sociological theories that aim to predict social behaviour or outcomes, conflict theory is generally more descriptive and critical than predictive. It offers rich explanations of inequality but often lacks testable hypotheses or empirical precision. As a result, applying it in policy or research settings can be challenging without additional frameworks or methodologies to support data-driven analysis.

5. Limited Attention to Micro-Level Interactions

Traditional conflict theory is often focused on macro-level analysis institutions, classes, and systems while paying relatively little attention to everyday interpersonal interactions and cultural meaning-making. Although theorists like Randall Collins and Lewis Coser have attempted to bridge this gap, the theory still struggles to incorporate insights from symbolic interactionism and phenomenology that emphasize individual experience and identity formation (Coser, 1956; Collins R. , 2022).

6. Difficulty Accounting for Social Change Without Revolution

Marxist-influenced conflict theory tends to envision revolutionary upheaval as the primary mechanism of social transformation. However, many contemporary societies experience meaningful change through reform, negotiation, and legal activism. Critics argue that conflict theory is less equipped to explain how gradual or non-violent changes occur, such as civil

rights advancements or democratic reforms, which may not fit its structural-conflict model (Sekibo & Iroye, 2024).

Table-2 Critiques on conflict theory

S. No	Critique	Explanation
1.	Overemphasis on conflict	Ignores social harmony, consensus, and shared norms
2.	Economic reductionism	Neglect identity, culture, and non-economic power dynamics
3.	Weak sense of agency	Focuses more on structural forces than human action or resistance
4.	Limited predictive capacity	Rich in critique but low on testable or measurable predictions
5.	Macro-level bias	Fails to fully address micro-level, everyday social interactions
6.	Revolutionary bias	Overlooks possibilities for non-revolutionary, incremental social change

Conclusion and Future Directions

Conflict theory continues to offer a compelling framework for understanding the structures of inequality, power, and social change in contemporary society. Rooted in the revolutionary insights of Karl Marx and later expanded by thinkers like Max Weber, C. Wright Mills, and Ralf Dahrendorf, the theory has evolved from a narrow focus on economic class conflict to a broader, more nuanced analysis of institutional power, authority, and ideological control. Its integration with intersectional approaches has made it especially useful in examining complex systems of domination involving race, gender, and global inequality.

At its core, conflict theory challenges the notion that social institutions function harmoniously for the benefit of all. Instead, it emphasizes that social order is maintained through coercion, control, and the perpetuation of elite interests, whether through educational systems, legal codes, or cultural narratives. By tracing the theory's development across multiple generations of sociological thought, this review has shown that the central themes like, power, inequality, resistance, and structural reproduction remains deeply relevant and widely applicable.

As societies continue to grapple with rising inequality, authoritarianism, environmental crisis, and technological disruption, conflict theory offers both a diagnostic lens and a critical tool for advocacy. It can be used to interrogate how emerging forms of digital surveillance, algorithmic bias, and global capitalism reinforce existing hierarchies, often under the illusion of neutrality or progress.

Looking forward, scholars can enrich conflict theory by:

1. Deepening intersectional analyses that reflect overlapping oppressions across race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability.
2. Exploring the role of technology and media in reinforcing or challenging dominant power structures.
3. Engaging with ecological conflict such as resource exploitation, climate injustice, and environmental racism as a vital frontier for future research.

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