

# Conflict theory and social theory essay sample

[Politics](#), [Marxism](#)



## Abstract

This essay aims to discuss the theories of Social action as well as the Conflict Theory. I am going to go deep into each of the theories as well as put some focus on the key figures them being Max Gluckman and Lewis A. Coser of the Conflict Theory and Also Max Weber and Victor Turner of The Social Action Theory. I am also going to go into comparison of these two theories and also what makes them so different from each other. According to my understanding conflict theory puts a lot of emphasis on the role a person/an individual and/or a group can exercise their influence, power and control over others so that there can be social order. While social action theory stresses the fact that the individual has the ability to be able to apply control of their own actions.

## Conflict Theory

The idea of conflict has increasingly over the past few years preoccupied the minds of many anthropologists both theoretical as well as on the factual level, on the theoretical level we see this revealed in the writings of Coser who by the way based his own theories on the writings of Simmel. And also Gluckman who puts a lot of emphasis on the role of conflict within the society (Rex, 2006). Conflict theory puts emphasis on the individuals or groups ability to exercise power, influence as well as control over others in order to produce social order. This theory in actual fact state that for society or an organization to be able to function, all the individuals that are within this environment needs to participate in a struggle so that their benefits can be increased. Which will at the end of the day lead up to social change. According to Cragun et al (2011), the conflict theory argues that society in

not a solitary or social consensus, but rather it is about competition. This means that society is made up of individuals who are always competing for the limited resources.

The conflict also explains the conflict that is there between social classes, it is the theory that states that there is a continuous existence of struggles within all aspects of the society, the struggles that occur in the society are not necessarily physically violent, it just points out to the never ending struggle for each individual and group in the society in order to increase their own benefits. As Collins (1990) noted, conflict theory is something of a misnomer. The theories that have been given this name are in fact theories of a collective agency and of competition for resources (Scott, 2012). While a few of these theories may be centered on conflict of interest and the social divisions that they may create, they do not see the obvious expression of conflict as being the normal state of affairs. Scott (2012), concludes by saying that conflict is seen as an endemic but intermitted feature of collective action as an ever present possibility in social life. Basic Features

The Conflict theory has a few basic features that describes it as a theory (Barrett. 2009).

1. Conflict is normal and it is also wide spread.
2. Conflict is positive and is functional too.
3. Conflict acts as a safety valve.
4. Conflict with an outside group generates internal solidarity.
5. The society consists of criss-crossing identities, loyalties, and strains which will ultimately nullify each other, resulting in harmony and integration.

6. Societal equilibrium is the product of the balance of opposition.

7. Conflict is a sociological concept.

### Primary Assumptions

1. Competition over the resources that are scarce and very limited is the heart and the centre of all social relationships. According to Cragun et al (2011), competition rather than consensus is a characteristic of human relationships. 2. Structural inequality within the power as well as the rewards that are built into all the social structures. Individuals and groups that benefit from any particular structure strives to see it maintained (Cragun et al, 2011). 3. Change occurs as a result of conflict between competing interests rather than adaptation. Change is often abrupt and revolutionary rather than evolutionary (Cragun et al, 2011). Key Figures

Conflict theory was first elaborated in the United Kingdom by Max Gluckman and John Rex, in the United States it was elaborated by Lewis A. Coser and Randall Collins and in Germany by Ralf Dahrendorf, the works all of these theorists were influenced by Karl Marx and Georg Simmel and other founding fathers of European Sociology (Cragun et al, 2011). Even if this is the case in this essay I am going to keep my focus on Max Gluckman and Lewis A. Coser, and how they explained the theory. 1. Max Gluckman

Unlike earlier structural functionalist Gluckman did not view social structure as monolithic or homeostatic, but instead he saw the pervasive presence of conflict within all social institutions and relationships (McGee & Warmes, 2013). Gluckman borrowed a lot of his views from Marx, he believed that conflict spreads through every aspects of the social life. However instead of

seeing these conflicts as constantly ripping the nature of social life into shreds, Gluckman saw that there is an intersection that ties ethnicity, kinship, politics and economics acting together in order to ensure that these conflicts do not that these conflicts do not undermine the social structure that is already in existence but instead to strengthen it (McGee & Warms, 2013). 2. Lewis A. Coser

Lewis Coser analysed conflict from the functionalist perspective. The title of his book of 1956: *The functions of social conflict* suggests the term conflict functionalism as an appropriate label for his approach (Johnson, 2008). Coser characterised conflict as being normal, broad and positive, he saw it as contributing to the integration of the society and acted as a valve for strains that otherwise might build up and also tear the society apart (Barrett, 2009). Just like Gluckman, Coser argued that the multiple group connections and the criss-crossing conflicts cancelled each other out, which prevents deep social cleavages from developing, and he also placed a lot of special emphasis on the part that is played by the external conflict in raising the levels of group or community consciousness and cohesions (Barrett, 2009).

According to Barrett (2009), the overall impression in Coser's work was the fact that conflict had a salutary impact on just about everything that it touches. Coser's perspective was mostly based on the ideas of Georg Simmel. While Simmel had viewed conflict as being one of the most basic forms of social interaction that is linked in complicated ways with other forms like Cooperation, Coser's goal was to show that certain kinds of conflict may have positive or beneficial consequences for the larger system

in which it occurs (Johnson, 2008). However this does not necessarily mean that conflict is good morally, but instead the main focus is on its unbiased consequence, whether these consequences are good or whether they are bad in a moral sense is a completely separate question. Limitations of Conflict Theory

The main primary limitation of the conflict theory is the fact that it overlooks the stability of the society. While societies are in a constant state of change majority of the change is very small and it sometimes goes almost unnoticed. According to Cragun et al (2011), many of the border elements of societies remain remarkably stable over time. Conflict theory focuses on the change and the conflict, also keeping in mind of the fact that neither (conflict & change) is better than the other. Social Action Theory

According to Kalberg (1980), social action theory focuses on the ability of to individual to exercise control over their own actions; how behaviours relate to cause effects. This concept was primarily developed by Max weber in order to observe how human behaviours are related in order to cause and effect change in the social sphere. The theory of social action more than the structural functionalist positions accept and assume that humans vary in their actions according to the social context and how it will affect other people; when a potential reaction is not desirable, the action is modified (Cram101, 2012).

“‘Action’ in this definition is meant the human behavior when and to the extent that the agent or agents see it as subjectively meaningful. the meaning to which we refer may be either (a) the meaning actually intended

either by an individual agent on a particular historical occasion or by a number of agents on an approximate average in a given set of cases, or (b) the meaning attributed to the agent or agents, as types, in a pure type constructed in the abstract. In neither case is the ' meaning' to be thought of as somehow objectively ' correct' or ' true' by some metaphysical criterion. This is the difference between the empirical sciences of action, such as sociology and history, and any kind of priori discipline, such as jurisprudence, logic, ethics, or aesthetics whose aim is to extract from their subject-matter ' correct' or ' valid' meaning" (Weber, 1922). Types of action

Weber classified action into four types, each of them based on the meaning of the actor. In distinguishing between four ideal types of social action, Weber proceeds to point out differing ways that will or may be oriented to specific courses of action (Murphy and Throop, 2010). Instrumental rational action, the actor's will is determined by expectations concerning the appropriate means and the conditions of attaining the actors own rationally pursued and calculated ends. While the value-rational action in contrast is structured in such a way that the will is orientated to a value for its own sake of some ethical, aesthetic, religious or other form of behaviour independently of its prospects of success. And finally in the effective action and the traditional action, the will of the actor is determined by the actors state of feeling and integrated habits respectively (Murphy and Throop, 2010). Key

#### Figures

Even though this theory was developed by Max Weber along with there are other theorists who contributed to this theory. 1. Max Weber

We have already noted that Weber wanted to develop the social action theory in such a way that it tries to examine social action from the point of view of the social actors. Weber shares with Marx the desire to develop what we can call a theory of social action that is a reasonable account of how and why social actors act as they do (Ransome, 2010). Weber says that the social action provides social actors with the opportunity for them to be able to act out their beliefs and their values. Weber's theory of action states that action can be distinguished one from another depending on how the actor expresses themselves. Evaluation

The differences between these two theories can be seen when one first of all looks at the basic viewpoints, but there are also some similarities between them. While conflict theory tends to lean more on the fact that conflict is the main determiner of social change, the social action theory emphasizes that an individual or a group is influenced by their actions, it also puts some stress on the person's conscience and the ability for the individual to determine what they want to act out. The similarity of these two theories is that they are both at the end of the day aimed at seeing social change within the society. According to Barrett (2009), the social action theory succeeded where the conflict theory failed largely, because it constituted a genuine alternative to the over-socialized model of the actor embraced by the structural functionalists and because it incorporated conflict into its framework.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to believe that any kind of change is one of the constant things that happen in our world, there will never be a time where we



going to here that no change took place. As for how this change comes about, I have discussed and explained in this essay using two of the theories that explain social change even though they both differ in their perspective and explanation of how social change comes along, what they both emphasize is the fact that change will always take place and in my view I think that that is the important part of it all.

## References

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