

CHAPTER 1

CRITICAL OR CONFLICT THEORIES

Critical or conflict theories state that conflict and inequality are a normal part of society and that many of our actions are aimed at attempting to gain influence over other groups of people. According to these theories, conflict between various groups is a major force that shapes society and leads to social change. This chapter will explain these theories and discuss the role of Karl Marx, Barbara Ehrenreich, and Max Weber.

Critical or Conflict Theories

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ANALYSIS QUESTIONS

- What are the main characteristics of conflict theories?
- Which examples does the chapter give of social change caused by conflict?
- What are some choices that people who earn low wages need to make?
- Explain how ethnic conflict can be ended.
- Why is feminist theory part of conflict theory?

Critical theories focus on the conflict inherent at many different levels throughout society. Conflict theorists argue that inequality is built into the system and that those who control resources maintain their power by establishing rules giving them advantage. Social change only occurs through conflict (Tischler, 2014).

The same-sex marriage conflict provides an example of how social change occurs through conflict. On June 26, 2015, the Supreme Court made it legal for same-sex couples to marry throughout the United States (Liptak, 2015). This followed a long struggle at the state and federal level, in courtrooms and voting booths. The video below describes the homosexual struggle for civil rights.



2013 was a break-through year for lesbian and gay rights

Marxist Theory

One of the most significant theorists in the history of sociology, Karl Marx (1818-1883) originated the conflict or critical approach (McClelland, 2000). His best-known work, *The Communist Manifesto*, written with Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) in 1848, explains that society is broken into a ruling class and a working class, and inequality results from the ruler's capitalist exploitation. Here, owners of the means of production exploit workers. Marx divided society into people who control the means of production, and people who sell their labor to them.

Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat. (...) The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honored and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage laborers.

(Marx and Engels, 1908, p. 17-22)



Engels (left) and Marx with Marx's wife and daughters

By thus dividing society into two groups - **bourgeoisie** (boor-zwah-zee) and **proletariat**, or owners and workers - Marx and Marxist sociologists were able to explain many social phenomena by pointing out the economic circumstances of society and of groups within society. The bourgeoisie's aim is to maintain and increase control over the means of production by amassing more and more capital. The proletariat, in the meantime, tries to find ways to sell its labor to the bourgeoisie.

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[The proletariat is] a class of laborers, who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labor increases capital. These laborers, who must sell themselves piecemeal, are a commodity, like every other article of commerce, and are consequently exposed to all the vicissitudes of competition, to all the fluctuations of the market.

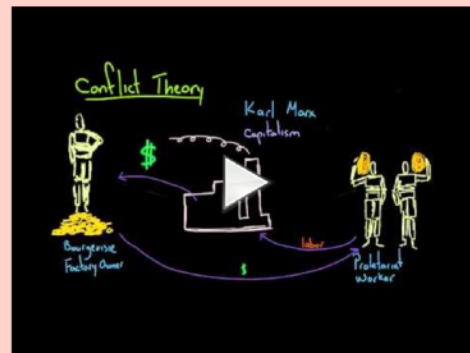
(Marx and Engels, 1908, p. 31)

Both classes also try to outsmart each other, by manipulating the law, committing crimes, and using loopholes. However, according to Marxist theory, the bourgeoisie has the upper hand because it controls money and the means of production.

A fundamental question to ask in any conflict theoretical matter is: **who benefits?** Who benefits from imprisoning thousands of Americans for non-violent, drug-related crimes? Who benefits from giving mortgages to people who don't have a steady source of income? Who benefits from athletes who use

performance-enhancing drugs? The answers to these questions show that there is a constant tug-of-war between those who control the means of production, and those who depend on them.

This video provides a brief overview of Karl Marx's ideas:



Read chapter 1 (pp. 7-23) of *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* [here](#)

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Max Weber

A founder of sociology, Max Weber (1864-1920) expanded the study of the causes and effects of capitalism. He added social status as a major force shaping society, with a wider variety of groups and inter-group conflicts. Weber introduced social stratification ideas, based on status and political power. His studies found that there are more ways to gain an advantage over others: people can try to control the economic means of production, or they can attempt to increase their social status by, for example, becoming a local politician.

Weber also expressed disenchantment with capitalism. He described the characteristics of bureaucracies as organizations dividing jobs into specific functions arranged in a strict hierarchy. Although bureaucracies create efficiency, Weber notes that such structures can be used to maintain power and domination over others. He referred to this as domination through knowledge (Kim, 2012). He argued that the state monopolizes the use of force and uses political leadership to sustain itself.



Fast food workers are often paid the minimum hourly wage, currently in Florida \$8.25



Barbara Ehrenreich

A great example of a current conflict-theoretical project is Barbara Ehrenreich's attempt to live on minimum wage. A journalist, Ehrenreich (1941) left her job to work low-wage jobs and explore conflict theories. She was a waitress, hotel maid, cleaning woman, nursing home aide and Wal-Mart sales clerk. Her book *Nickel and Dimed* (2001) exposes the working poor's difficulties surviving in an economy that scorns poor people. She shows the negative effects on individuals from the economic rules established by the powerful,

and she shows how being part of the working poor impacts one's concept of self.

When someone works for less pay than she can live on — when, for example, she goes hungry so that you can eat more cheaply and conveniently — then she has made a great sacrifice for you, she has made you a gift of some part of her abilities, her health, and her life. The 'working poor,' as they are approvingly termed, are in fact the major philanthropists of our society. They neglect their own children so that the children of others will be cared for; they live in substandard housing so that other homes will be shiny and perfect; they endure privation so that inflation will be low and stock prices high. To be a member of the working poor is to be an anonymous donor, a nameless benefactor, to everyone else.
(Ehrenreich, 2014, para. 2)

Ehrenreich answers the important question in conflict theory of who benefits: it's us! Every time we buy a cheap burger, we take advantage of the underpaid fast food worker. Every time a medical aide helps us, we enrich ourselves at his expense.

The video below is an excerpt from *The American Ruling Class*, a "dramatic-documentary-musical" featuring Barbara Ehrenreich and Harper's Magazine editor emeritus Lewis Lapham.

This excerpt shows Barbara Ehrenreich while she tries to make ends meet as a waitress.



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Other Types of Conflict

Marx's ideas have been expanded to include many types of conflict including race, gender, sexual orientation and political power. So instead of seeing a perpetual conflict between bourgeoisie and proletariat, theorists see a variety of conflicts between whites and non-whites, between men and women, between straight people and gay people, between those that have access to political power and those that don't. The dominant group tries to maintain and enhance the power it already has, while the dominated group attempts to chip away at that power to get its own needs met.

Critical or conflict theories state that conflict and inequality are a normal part of society and that many of people's actions attempt to gain influence over other groups. We are all part of competing groups, through gender, religion, ethnicity, age, and many other factors, and groups compete for limited resources. Therefore, conflict influences all social relationships. Some groups benefit from society's rules, while other groups fall victim. According to these theories, conflict between various groups is a major force that shapes society and leads to social change.

Many of the distinctions we make between groups of people, and on which we base "us-against-them"

conflict, are quite random. Race, for example, is a "**social construct.**"

The term race is used to denote what are perceived as biological differences, such as skin color and facial configurations. But we mean more than just biology; if we did not, we would make racial distinctions between the tall and short races, the gray and brown-eyed races, and similar rather trivial biological differences. In fact, we should probably never use the term "racial" group because it has no scientific basis. Where, for example, is the cutoff line in terms of biology between being "black" or "white," Asian or Caucasian? When we use the term "race," then, we really mean ethnicity, or those behavioral, cultural, and organizational differences that allow us to categorize members of a population as distinctive. (Turner, 2005, p. 233)

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Ethnicity can then become another way to distinguish ourselves from others, provide an excuse to believe in stereotypes, and even lead to violence. On a global scale, ethnic conflicts in countries around the world have led to millions of deaths, displacement of families, and brutality to people living in war-torn areas.

In the following video, Stefan Wolff discusses how to end ethnic conflicts.

Stefan Wolff's Ted Talk about ethnic conflict



Feminist Theory

Feminist theory, an offshoot of critical theory, explains societal life in terms of women's experiences, with the assumption that women are oppressed through a system of patriarchy. In patriarchy, men control women's lives. Feminists initiated many social changes through conflict—an early example is the **suffrage movement** when women demanded the right to vote. Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906) compared the imbalance of power between men, who were allowed to vote, and women, who were not, to the imbalance of power between other groups:



To [women] this government has no just powers derived from the consent of the governed. To them this government is not a democracy. It is not a republic. It is an odious aristocracy; a hateful oligarchy of sex; the most hateful aristocracy ever established on the face of the globe; an oligarchy of wealth, where the rich govern the poor. An oligarchy of learning, where the educated govern the ignorant, or even an oligarchy of race, where the Saxon rules the African, might be endured; but this oligarchy of sex, which makes father, brothers, husband, sons, the oligarchs over the mother and sisters, the wife and daughters, of every household - which ordains all men sovereigns, all women subjects, carries dissension, discord, and rebellion into every home of the nation.

(Anthony, 1872, para. 6)

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Feminists continue to struggle against unfair treatment in society, and address issues such as equal pay for equal work, barriers to career advancement, sexual harassment, rape, violence against women, and the feminization of poverty (Thio, 2000).



You can read three speeches by Susan B. Anthony [here](#)

The video below is fascinating talk by Zainab Salib, founder of Women International, about women's role in war and how they can contribute in peace negotiations.

Zainab Salib's Ted Talk about women's role in war



Conclusion

Critical or conflict theory applies to individual, organizational and global conflict. The original theorists focused on differences in economic power. Karl Marx divided society up into two groups: those who own the means of production, and those who need to sell their labor to make a living. Max Weber added to this dichotomy a third path to power: status.

Later writers expanded the ideas to other types of conflict. Barbara Ehrenreich's study showed that it's not just the bourgeoisie takes advantage of the workers. In fact, we all take advantage of those who labor for wages that don't cover living expenses, by expecting our food to be cheap and our living quarters to be spotless, without breaking the bank. Often without knowing it, we are all part of groups that either work to expand their dominance over others, or are chipping away at the domination under which they suffer.

On the positive side, examples in this chapter show that conflict is often the vehicle for social change. Women have expanded their power by gaining the right to vote and by playing a more active part in society and gays have conquered the right to marry in the United States. Without awareness of the ongoing conflict, these changes would not have been realized.

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