

Ralf Dahrendorf

In works of Ralf Dahrendorf, the tenets of conflict and consensus are juxtaposed. He is the major exponent of the position that society has two focuses: conflict and consensus and society could not exist without both conflict and consensus. To the conflict theorists, society is held together by 'enforced constraints' that is some positions in society are delegated power and authority over others. This fact of social life led Dahrendorf to his central thesis that the differential distribution of authority invariably becomes the determining factor of systematic social conflicts.

Authority:

Dahrendorf concentrated on large 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. He was interested not only in the structure of these positions but also in the conflict among them. The structural origin of such conflicts must be sought in the arrangement of social roles endowed with expectations of domination or subjection. To Dahrendorf, the first task of conflict analysis was to identify various authority roles within society.

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. Further, a person of 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 association'. These may be seen as associations of people controlled by a hierarchy of authority positions. Authority within each association is dichotomous, thus two, only two conflict groups can be formed within any association. Those in position of authority and those in position of subordination hold certain interests that are 'contradictory in substance and direction'. Here we encounter another key term in Dahrendorf's conflict theory – 'interests'.

Within every association, those in dominant positions seek to maintain the status quo while those in subordinate positions seek to 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. The 'interests of superordinates and subordinates are objective in the sense that they are reflected in the expectations (roles) attached to position. Individuals are 'adjusted' or 'adapted' to their roles when they contribute to conflict between superordinates and subordinates. Dahrendorf called these unconscious role expectations 'latent interests'.

Manifest interests are those latent interests that have become conscious. Dahrendorf saw the analysis of connection between latent and manifest interests as a major task of conflict theory.

Groups, Conflict and Change

Further Dahrendorf distinguished between three broad types of groups. The first is the 'quasi groups' or 'aggregates of incumbents of position with identical role interests'. These are the recruiting ground for the second types of group – 'the interest group'. Out of all the many interest groups, emerge 'conflict group' or those that actually engage in group conflict.

Dahrendorf felt that the concepts of latent and manifest interests, of quasi groups, interest groups and conflict groups were basis 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 personal, political conditions such as the overall political climate, 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.

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 that the conservative function of conflict is only one part of social reality, conflict also leads to change and development. He 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.

References:

Contemporary Sociological Theory and Its Classical Roots: The Basics. By George Ritzer, Jeffrey Stepnisky. Edition 5. 2017.