

## **SOC 201: Classical Sociological Theory**

### **Lewis Coser and the theory of social conflict;**

Coser rejected Durkheim's view of violence and dissent as deviant and pathological and stressed the integrative and adaptability functions of conflict for social systems. During 60's and 70's when functionalism lost most of its early appeals, thinkers who put their energies to frame in new perspective, Coser is the most prominent among them. Coser has consistently addressed the issue of conflict under emphasising the existing dialectical perspectives and openly addressing a functional conflict perspective. He was much concerned with the web of conflict that can both bind a society together and simultaneously generate struggles and confrontation. Coser emphasises that conflict is the only one side of social life and no more fundamental than consensus. He viewed conflict as a process that, under certain conditions, functions to maintain the body social or some of its parts. Herein lies Coser's approach to the mingling of functionalism and conflict perspective.

Coser's contribution to conflict theory is distinctive in two important respects. Firstly, he discusses social conflict as a result of factors other than opposing group interest. Secondly, he was very much concerned with the destructive consequences of conflict. Though his analysis deals with the intensity and violence involved in conflict, he was less interested about the institutional means of conflict. He was in favour of the explanation about the consequences which include greater social stability as well as change. His discussions on conditions under which a conflict is likely to be divisive or cohesive adds considerably to Dahrendorf's analysis of conflict.

Coser consistently criticised Parsonian functionalism for its failure to address the issue of conflict. He has also been sharply critical of Dahrendorf and other dialectical theorists for under emphasising the positive functions of conflict. In his first major work on conflict, Coser launched what became the standard polemic against functionalism; conflict is not given sufficient attention, with related phenomena such as deviance and dissent too easily viewed as pathological for the equilibrium of the social system. Coser has consistently maintained that functional theorising has too often neglected the dimensions of power and interest. He does not follow either of violent conflict. Coser seeks to correct Dahrendorf's analytical excesses by emphasising the integrative and adaptability functions of conflict for social systems. Coser's work is filled with analogies. In describing the functions of violence, Coser used the analogy of violence to pain in human body, since both can serve as a danger signal that allows the body to readjust itself.

Coser develops an image of society that stresses:

1. The social world can be viewed as a system of variously inter related parts.
2. All social systems reveals imbalances, tensions and conflicts of interests among variously inter related parts.
3. Processes within and between the systems constituent parts operate under different conditions to maintain, change and increase or decrease a system's integration and adaptability.
4. Many processes, such as violence, dissent, deviance and conflict, which are typically viewed as disruptive to the system, can also be viewed, under specifiable conditions, as strengthening the system's basis of integration as well as its adaptability to the environment.

Coser's analysis as emphasising 1. Imbalances in the integration of system parts lead to 2. The outbreak of varying types of conflict among these parts, which, in turn, causes 3. Temporary reintegration of the system, which causes 4. Increased flexibility in the system's structure, increased capability to resolve future imbalances through conflict and increased capacity to adapt to changing conditions.

Using both the substance and style of Simmel's provocative analysis, Coser has expanded the scope of Simmel's initial insights, incorporating propositions not only from Marx but also from Weber and the contemporary literature on conflict. His propositions can be included 1. The causes of conflict 2. The violence of conflict 3. The duration of conflict and 4. The functions of conflict.

**There are some propositions on the causes of conflict:**

1. The more subordinate members in a system of inequality question the legitimacy of the existing distribution of scarce resources, the more likely are they to initiate conflict.

A. the fewer are the channels for redressing grievances over the distribution of scarce resources by subordinates, the more likely are they to question legitimacy.

i. the fewer are the internal organisations segmenting emotional energies of subordinates, the more likely are they to be without grievance alternatives and as a result, to question legitimacy.

a. the greater are the ego deprivations of those without grievance channels, the more likely are they to question legitimacy.

B. The more membership in privileged groups is sought by subordinates and the less mobility allowed, the more likely are they to withdraw legitimacy.

2. The more deprivations of subordinates are transformed from absolute to relative, the greater will be their sense of unjust and hence, the more likely are they to initiate conflict.

A. the less is the degree to which socialisation experiences of subordinates generate internal ego constraints, the more likely are they to express relative deprivation.

B. The less are the external constraints applied to subordinates, the more likely are they to experience relative deprivation.

The withdrawal of legitimacy from an existing system of inequality is a critical precondition for conflict. Coser is arguing that conflicts of interest are likely to be exposed only after the deprived withdraw legitimacy from the system. Coser emphasises that the social order is maintained by some degree of consensus over existing arrangements and that disorder through conflict occurs when conditions decreasing this consensus or legitimacy over existing arrangements are present. He pointed out that conflict arises when i) subordinate withdraw legitimacy or ii) there is emotional arousal, then they may withdraw legitimacy or iii) they feel deprived then they become emotionally aroused. The deprivation may be absolute or relative. The absolute deprivation may occur if the basic means of life are not satisfied. Relative deprivation is happened when the subordinate compare situation with other group (i.e. the reference group) when the group becomes conscious about their absolute deprivation, then comes the question of relative deprivation. The withdrawal of legitimacy is not likely to result in conflict. People must first become emotionally aroused. The theoretical task then becomes one of specifying the conditions that translate the withdrawal of legitimacy into emotional arousal, as opposed to some other emotional state, such as apathy, resignation. Here Coser draws inspiration from Marx's notion of relative deprivation. Coser pointed three conditions of emotional arousal. The first condition occurs when they do not have adequate channels to express their deprivation, secondly, emotional arousal takes place if there is less scope of social mobility, thirdly, emotional arousal may occur when religions have lost control or to deflect the people from the sense of deprivation.

Coser argues that hostility and conflict take their relative \*\* on the nature of realistic and non-realistic issues which makes conflict both violent and enduring. Simultaneously, he feels that the functional interdependence and relations among social units are also the reasons behind the nature and extent of violence in conflict.

**Coser has given some propositions on the violence of conflict:**

1. The more groups engage in conflict over realistic issues (obtainable goals), the more likely are they to seek compromises over the means to realize their interests, and hence, the less violent are the conflict.

2. The more groups engage in conflict over non-realistic issues, the greater is the level of emotional arousal and involvement in the conflict, and hence, the more violent is the conflict.

A. the more conflict occurs over core values; the more likely it is to be over non-realistic issues.

B. The more a realistic conflict endures, the more likely it is to become increasingly non-realistic.

3. The less functionally interdependent are relations among social units in a system, the less is the availability of institutional means for absorbing conflicts and tensions and hence the more violent is the conflict.

A. The greater are the power differentials between super and subordinates in a system, the less functionally interdependent are relations.

B. The greater is the level of isolation of subpopulations in a system, the less functionally interdependent are relations.

**Coser's proposition on the Duration of Conflict:**

1. The less limited are the goals of the opposing parties to a conflict the more prolonged is the conflict.

2. The less is the degree of consensus over the goals of conflict, the more prolonged is the conflict. He has divided the nature of conflict into two types: - i.e. external and internal conflict to explain their relative importance.

3. 3. The less the parties in a conflict can interpret their adversary's symbolic points of victory and defeat, the more prolonged is the conflict.

4. The more leaders of conflicting parties can perceive that complete attainment of goals is possible at only very high costs, the less prolonged is the conflict.
5. The greater the capacity of leaders of each conflict party to persuade followers to terminate conflict, the less prolonged is the conflict.

The intensity of conflict and its level of violence increase the demarcation of boundaries centralisation of authority, ideological solidarity and suppression of dissent and deviance within each of the conflicting parties. Conflict intensity is presumably functional because it increases integration. Centralisation of power as well as the suppression of deviance and dissent creates mal integrative pressures in the long run. Coser does not specify the conditions under which these mal integrative pressures are likely to surface. Complex systems (that have a number of interdependence and exchanges) are more likely to have frequent conflicts that are less emotionally involving and violent than those systems that are less complex and where tensions accumulate. It is in the nature of interdependence, Coser argues for conflicts to erupt frequently, but since they emerge periodically, emotions do not build to the point where violence is inevitable. When conflicts are frequent and when violence and intensity are reduced, conflict will promote flexible coordination within the system and increase capacity to adjust and adapt to environmental circumstances.

**Coser's proposition on the functions of conflict for the social whole:**

1. The more differentiated and functionally interdependent are the units in a system, the more likely is the conflict to be frequent but of low degrees of intensity and violence.
2. The more frequent are conflicts, the less is their intensity and the lower is their level of violence, then the more likely are conflicts in a system to:
  - a. Increase the levels of innovation and creativity of system units.
  - b. Release hostilities before they polarize system units
  - c. Promote normative regulation of conflict relations
  - d. Increase awareness of realistic issues
  - e. Increase the number of associative conditions among social units.

The more the conflict promotes a,b,c,d and e above, then the greater will be the level of internal social integration of the system and greater will be its capacity to adapt to its external environment.

Coser's approach has done much to correct for the one-sidedness of Dahrendorf's analysis, and he reintroduced Simmel's ideas into conflict theory; yet Coser's represented analytical one-sidedness. Coser begins with statements about the inevitability of forces, coercion, constraint, and conflict, but his analysis quickly turns to the integrative and adaptive consequences of such processes. He emphasis on integrative and adaptive functions of conflict into functional needs and requisites that necessitate or even cause, conflict to occur. It seems Coser's technological inspiration appears to have come more from Simmel's organic model than Marx's dialectical scheme. He implies the body social causes conflict in order to meet its integrative needs, and it is still viewed primarily as a crucial process in promoting integration and adaptation. For in trying to compensate for the one-sidedness of dialectical theory and functionalism, Coser presents skewed approach.

### **References**

1. Abraham.M Francis 2011. Modern sociological theory-An Introduction, Oxford University Press, New Delhi
2. kundu. Abhijit 2012. Sociological Theory
3. Turner. Jonathan H 2004 The Structure of Sociological Theory
4. Ritzer .George, "Sociological theory" Eighth Editon.2011