

# Social Conflict Theory

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will explain the social conflict approach to social theory, through definition and discussion of:

1. Social Conflict Theory
2. Karl Marx
3. Max Weber
4. C. Wright Mills

## 1. SOCIAL CONFLICT THEORY

**Social conflict theory** argues that society is characterized by various inequalities and conflicts that cause people to act socially, producing change. To quote Karl Marx, a practitioner working with the social conflict approach, "Philosophers have only interpreted the world. The point is to change it." The focus of social conflict theory, therefore, is change.

This perspective contrasts significantly with the structural functional perspective. Society, according to the social conflict approach, is not harmonious or stable; it doesn't generate harmonious equilibrium. Conversely, it is rife with inequality. The social conflict approach consists of analyzing inequalities of race, class, gender, and ethnicity, and the resulting social conflicts. These conflicts, in turn, result in change--change that will move society.



### HINT

Since we're talking about how the overall social structure shapes inequality in society, this is an example of a **macro-level orientation**--a broad look at how structures shape society.



### TERMS TO KNOW

#### Social Conflict Theory

An approach to social theory that argues that society is characterized by various inequalities and conflicts that cause people to act socially, producing change.

#### Macro-Level Orientation

A zoomed-out look at the structures and institutions that shape society.

## 2. KARL MARX

One of the thinkers who worked with the social conflict approach is **Karl Marx**, whose main writings occurred in the mid-19th century (approximately 1840 to 1870). Marx was a German economist and sociologist, and the social conflict approach largely grew out of Marx's views about society.

He lived during a time when capitalism was industrializing and developing, so he witnessed firsthand the atrocities of exploitation within capitalist production in London factories. Much of his worldview and philosophy originated from observing the poor working conditions in the trenches, where children were being overworked and exploited.

For Marx, class conflict was the 'motor' of history--it was the driving force causing change in society. In his time, Marx viewed the fundamental class conflict as capitalists (those who owned the means of production, the factories, the equipment, the capital, etc.), versus the laborers (those who didn't). The laborers had nothing; they owned nothing other than their own bodies, and they could sell their labor to the capitalist. This represented a fundamental inequality from the start, which was quite problematic for Marx.

### IN CONTEXT

Marx's theory of capitalism explains why he thought class difference and class inequality was such a problem. In the formula below, M stands for money, C represents commodities, and M' stands for more money, or money prime.

Suppose Apple computers wants to produce computers and distribute them. It starts with some initial money, and with that money, it buys commodities. These commodities include the inputs that are used in the computers, the factories that produce the computers, and--critical for Marx--the labor to produce everything. Since laborers don't own any property, their only commodity to sell is their labor.

Apple takes all the commodities purchased with its initial money, and produces computers that everyone buys. However, the capitalists keep the majority of the profits, and they don't give the laborers their fair share, which could be construed as fundamentally exploitative.



exactly how Marx viewed class conflict and capitalism. For Marx, such a corrosive, conflict-ridden society would inevitably come apart and lead to a revolution in which the laborers would challenge the capitalists.

➦ **EXAMPLE** In 2012, you may recall Apple getting into trouble for not paying its store employees

enough and for exploiting workers in its China factories. Similarly, in the '90s, Nike suffered negative attention for its sweatshops. A Marxist would view these as examples of exploitation arising from class conflict and capitalism.



#### PEOPLE TO KNOW

##### Karl Marx

An economist and sociologist who argued that class is the fundamental inequality in society.

---

## 3. MAX WEBER

Another German sociologist, **Max Weber**, began writing after Marx, in the late 1800s to the early 1900s. He was able to look at capitalism with a longer perspective than Marx. When Marx's 'revolution' did not materialize, and capitalism didn't come apart like Marx had predicted, Weber speculated that class conflict and conflict in society must depend on more than just the ownership of property, like Marx theorized. To this end, Weber was more concerned with power and social honor than he was with the ownership of property.

While you can achieve power and social honor by owning property, or by being a capitalist, Weber thought there were other means to achieve power. Weber focused on status groups--political parties, old boys' clubs, etc.--and gave us the idea that these groups were constantly vying for social honor, prestige, and power. Once a group of people achieved these things, they did all they could to push all others away and sequester themselves, isolate themselves, in order to secure and hold on to that power.

Although Weber diverged from Marx's theory of class conflict being defined by property, his theory is still a fundamentally conflict-based view of society and he is considered a contributor to the social conflict approach.



#### PEOPLE TO KNOW

##### Max Weber

Renowned sociologist who theorized that conflict in society was also about power and social prestige.

---

## 4. C. WRIGHT MILLS

American sociologist **C. Wright Mills** proposed the idea of the **power elite**, which he defined as a small group of people at the top of society composed of corporate, political, and military leaders.

Mills theorized that the interests of this group of people--the elite at the top of society, the '1%'-- run counter to the interests of the rest of society, and in this way, they can be potentially dangerous for the masses.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Power Elite

A small group composed of the top corporate, political, and military people.



#### PEOPLE TO KNOW

## C. Wright Mills

An American sociologist famous for the "sociological imagination" and for the concept of the power elite.



### SUMMARY

Today you learned about the **social conflict theory**, which focuses on change in society produced by societal inequalities and conflicts. Some of the thinkers working within this tradition are **Karl Marx**, **Max Weber** and **C. Wright Mills**.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



### TERMS TO KNOW

#### Macro-level Orientation

A zoomed out look at the social structures and institutions that shape society.

#### Power Elite

A small group composed of the top corporate, political, and military people.

#### Social Conflict Theory

An approach to social theory that argues that society is characterized by various inequalities and conflicts that cause people to act socially, producing change.



### PEOPLE TO KNOW

#### C. Wright Mills

An American sociologist famous for the "sociological imagination" and for the concept of the power elite.

#### Karl Marx

An economist and sociologist who argued that class is the fundamental inequality in society.

#### Max Weber

Renowned sociologist who theorized that conflict in society was also about power and social prestige.