**Conflict Theory**

Conflict theory emphasizes the role of coercion and power in producing social order. This perspective is derived from the works of [Karl Marx](http://sociology.about.com/od/Profiles/p/Karl-Marx.htm), who saw society as fragmented into groups that compete for social and economic resources. Social order is maintained by domination, with power in the hands of those with the greatest political, economic, and social resources. When consensus exists, it is attributable to people being united around common interests, often in opposition to other groups. Marx theorized that the work of producing consensus was done in the "superstructure" of society--which is composed of social [institutions](http://sociology.about.com/od/I_Index/g/Institution.htm), political structures, and culture--and what it produced consensus for was the "base," the economic relations of production ([Read more about Marx's theory of base and superstructure here](http://sociology.about.com/od/Key-Theoretical-Concepts/fl/Base-and-Superstructure.htm)). Following on the heels of Marx, Italian scholar and activist [Antonio Gramsci](http://sociology.about.com/od/Profiles/fl/Antonio-Gramsci.htm) argued that consensus to rule is achieved in large part through [cultural hegemony](http://sociology.about.com/od/C_Index/fl/Cultural-Hegemony.htm), which refers to the dominant group's ability to attain consent to their rule through ideas, norms, values, and beliefs.

According to conflict theory, inequality exists because those in control of a disproportionate share of society’s resources actively defend their advantages. The masses are not bound to society by their shared values, but by coercion at the hands of those in power. This perspective emphasizes [social control](http://sociology.about.com/od/S_Index/g/Social-Control.htm), not consensus and conformity. Groups and individuals advance their own interests, struggling over control of societal resources. Those with the most resources exercise [power](http://sociology.about.com/od/P_Index/g/Power.htm) over others with inequality and power struggles result. There is great attention paid to class, [race](http://sociology.about.com/od/R_Index/fl/Race.htm), and [gender](http://sociology.about.com/od/G_Index/fl/Gender.htm) in this perspective because they are seen as the grounds of the most pertinent and enduring struggles in society.

Whereas most other [sociological theories](http://sociology.about.com/od/Sociology101/tp/Major-Sociological-Frameworks.01.htm) focus on the positive aspects of society,[conflict perspective](http://sociology.about.com/od/C_Index/g/Conflict-Perspective.htm) focuses on the negative, conflicted, and ever-changing nature of society. Unlike [functionalists](http://sociology.about.com/od/Sociological-Theory/a/Functionalist-Theory.htm) who defend the status quo, avoid [social change](http://sociology.about.com/od/S_Index/g/Social-Change.htm), and believe people cooperate to effect social order, conflict theorists challenge the status quo, encourage social change (even when this means social revolution), and believe rich and powerful people force social order on the poor and the weak. Conflict theorists, for example, may interpret an “elite” board of regents raising tuition to pay for esoteric new programs that raise the prestige of a local college as self-serving rather than as beneficial for students.

Whereas American sociologists in the 1940s and 1950s generally ignored the conflict perspective in favor of the functionalist, the tumultuous 1960s saw American sociologists gain considerable interest in conflict theory. They also expanded Marx's idea that the key conflict in society was strictly economic. Today, conflict theorists find social conflict between any groups in which the potential for [inequality](http://sociology.about.com/od/Disciplines/a/Sociology-Of-Social-Inequality.htm) exists:[racial](http://sociology.about.com/od/R_Index/fl/Racism.htm), [gender](http://sociology.about.com/od/Ask-a-Sociologist/fl/Yes-the-Gender-Pay-Gap-is-Real.htm), religious, political, economic, and so on. Conflict theorists note that unequal groups usually have conflicting values and agendas, causing them to compete against one another. This constant competition between groups forms the basis for the ever-changing nature of society. Critics of the conflict perspective suggest that it glosses over the complexities and nuances of everyday life and relationships of power.