Conflict Theory: Three Models

1. Marxism

For Marxist theory, power is the capacity to affect the life situations of people. Power is a key feature of the structuring relations of society. Accordingly, dominant power is largely in the hands of those who own and control the means of life. Capitalism structures an irresolvable conflict between the two fundamental classes, the working class and the capitalist class. (This is a consequence of the “logic” of capitalist reproduction: It is always in the interest of capitalists to increase surplus value (by extending the working day, reducing wages, introducing labor-saving technology, etc.) and these imperatives are always contrary to the interests of workers: class struggle.

Governments have power, but typically they are “instruments of the ruling class.” Ideally, governments are legitimated on liberal principles (consent of the government, a radical distinction between the public and the private (which legitimates the use of private power). For Marxists, such “consensus” depends upon “false consciousness.” But governments will act coercively if necessary to secure the stability of capitalist society.

In the classless society, there will not be class conflict and power will be democratically shared.

2. Parsonian Conflict Theory (Dahrendorf).

Dahrendorf writes that he is concerned “exclusively with relations of authority. For these alone (sic) are part of social structure and therefore permit the systematic derivation of group conflicts…” (p. 272). Moreover, “where there are authority relations, the superordinate element is socially expected to control by orders, and commands, warning and prohibitions, the behavior of the subordinate element” (ibid.). That is, his concern is exclusively with legitimated compliance relations.

Holds that there is both consensus and conflict in all “authority” relations so that individuals have both mutual interests and (opposing? potentially opposing? always opposing?) latent interests.

In contrast to Marxism which holds that capitalists have dominant power, for Dahrendorf, society is comprised of a host of “imperatively coordinated associations” (associations in which members are subject to “imperative control” or authority). None of the “associations” dominate. Accordingly, societies are comprised of “a plurality of competing dominant (and conversely, subjected) aggregates” (p. 275).

It is not denied that persons or groups have power, but “group conflicts” “are not the product of structurally fortuitous relations of power but come forth wherever authority is exercised” (p. 272). Indeed, in contrast to both Marx and Weber, Dahrendorf endeavors “to detach the category of conflict groups…from economic determinants” (p. 282). Finally, since authority relations are necessarily present in all societies, conflict is inevitable.

3. Elite Conflict Theory (C. Wright Mills)

Power for Mills “has to do with whatever decisions men make about the arrangements under which they live…” (p. 284). It is important to see that unlike Dahrendorf, Mills is not talking only about “authority” (“legitimately power”) or compliance: getting people to do what is commanded.
As with Pareto, Mosca, and Aron, Mills distinguishes elites and masses. For Mills, elites have power by virtue of their location in three linked key institutions (structures) in society: political, dominated by the executive power of the Federal Government, the economic, dominated by a few hundred corporations, and military. Mills rejects both the class struggle picture of the Marxists and the pluralist picture, shared by Dahrendorf and much political theory, which holds that the American system of power is “a moving balance of many competing interests” (p. 289). Finally, while “democracy” requires “a society of publics,” the US has become basically “a mass society” in which elite’s have the capacity to manage and manipulate “public opinion” and “the consent of men.”