

# Romania: General Considerations on the Potential Use of Social Conflict Theory in the Context of Social Changes Occurring in Traditional Rural Communities

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**Abstract.** *The article overviews some aspects of the social conflict as seen through the lenses of Marx and Dahrendorf classical approaches on conflict, as an attempt of understanding the social changes occurring in traditional rural communities.*

**Keywords:** *Karl Marx, Ralf Dahrendorf, social conflict, rural communities.*

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## Introduction

Within the conceptual phase of a research aiming to discuss conflicts in rural communities in Romania, we draw attention towards two set of sociological perspectives which will later on inform our empirical investigation. Currently, major social changes are occurring in rural communities from developing countries, such as Romania. Introduction of new technologies, marketing the shared resources, privatization of public services, increasing consumerism, implementation of new public policies and the decline of the local economy based on traditional principles exert a strong pressure on individuals and communities.

Studies identify several ways in which local communities are influenced by these social changes. In this respect, communities may fully accept global culture, they may reject it completely or they may partially adapt to changes (Swadzba, 2011). According to the same author, the main conflicts occur in the area of values related to family, work and religion. Romania makes a special case because of the persistence of some elements of rural traditional communities (Voicu, Arpinte, Petrescu, Preotesi, & Tomescu, 2010), offering an interesting setting for the analysis of specific social conflicts that may arise in these communities.

We argue that although numerous theories have attempted to explain social conflicts, particularly in relation to groups, social structure, values and power relations (Ritzer, 1992), the classic approaches on conflict cannot be overlooked. For this purpose, we overview some aspects of the social conflict theory as seen through the lenses of Marx and Dahrendorf. We compare these perspectives by highlighting what is more adequate for our future analysis.

### **Theories of Conflict**

The conflict was always a central element of sociological theory and analysis. In a general acceptance, the conflict can be seen as an open opposition, a struggle between individuals, groups, social classes, parties and communities, countries with economic, political, religious, ethnic and racial interests, divergent and incompatible with disruptive effects on social interaction. So there is a conflict when two or more people or groups manifest the perception that they have incompatible goals (Kriesberg, 1998). In the literature, the concept of “conflict” has received various interpretations, depending on the author. Thus, making a review of these, Havenga (2004) states that, in turn, the conflict was considered dissent or competition by Simmel, social illness by Parson and determinant factor in defining small groups in Aaron acceptance, fundamental process of the social movement by Bruce F. Ryan, central policy factor, according to Barber, or disturbance generating new balances.

From a sociological perspective, conflict theory assumes that society, as a whole, or organization, operates in such a manner that their members, both individuals and groups, wage a constant battle to maximize benefits, which generates inevitable social changes, such as political changes and revolutions. Conflict theory seeks to explain the causes, evolution, expression, settlement possibilities, effects and the typology of it (Havenga, 2004).

Early approaches include the theory of ethnic conflicts of Ludwig Gumplowicz and theory of conflicts between masses and elites of Gaetano Mosca, but the writings of three theorists are the ones who really dominated the intellectual and academic atmosphere in the nineteenth century and a good part of the twentieth century – Charles Darwin,

Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. The three personalities have explained the evolution of social conflict, focusing largely on the competitive and destructive aspects of it. Darwin emphasized the competition for existence and survival of the most powerful. Karl Marx highlighted the importance of class struggle in the emergence of social conflict, dividing society into two antagonistic classes: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Freud, in his vision of psychosexual development, concentrated on the continuing struggle between id, the root of biological child, and superego, the surrogate parental, internalized by social determination (Havenga, 2004).

More recently, after the Second World War, the term of conflict theory was used rather as a reference to the sociological writings of opponents' domination structural functionalism. Thus, relying to build their arguments on the economic conflict of Marx and conflict on the strength of Weber, subsequent theorists of conflict underlined the importance of the interest on the social norms and values. These interests are considered potential factors in generating conflicts, seen as normal aspects of social life and not as abnormal or dysfunctional appearances. An outstanding representative of the new vision is Ralf Dahrendorf, who in his "Classes and class conflict in industrial society" (1959) criticizes Marx's notion of class, arguing that the term of class in advanced post-capitalist societies emerges from the unequal distribution of authority and that this kind of society is characterized by disputes related to the participation or exclusion from the exercise of authority. Also, Lewis Coser proposes an integration model and one of conflict, but in terms of a positive conflict, functional in relation to the social system as a factor of change and progress (Havenga, 2004).

Unquestionable contribution to the development of theories of conflict and social conflict, in particular, had Machiavelli, Hobbes, Pareto, Comte, Durkheim, Weber, Wright Mills, Lewin (Stones, 1998), to name just the significant thinkers for their currents. In this paper we will focus only on the theory of conflict developed by Karl Marx and on its critics, and also the addition brought by Ralf Dahrendorf (1959), by comparing, in the same time, the vision of classical and modern theory of conflict.

### **Ralf Dahrendorf's Perspective on Social Conflict**

Dahrendorf (1958) formulates a systematic theory of social conflicts around the idea that society is built on conflicts based on social changes taking place in society. This theory assumes that neither Marxist theory nor the structural functionalist can explain social conflict in advanced societies. However, following the arguments proposed by Dahrendorf (1958), he believes that artificial opposition between different theories on the conflict and, therefore, society must be overcome by accepting the juxtaposition of certain elements. The same author emphasizes the importance of adequate theorization of the concept of social conflict, to reduce the risk of simplification and empirical generalizations which reduced the empirical value of this concept.

In the model proposed by Dahrendorf, he attempts to highlight that in the functionalist vision the society is described exclusively in an integrated mode, or the society has a strong coercive aspect (Dahrendorf, 1958). The author argues that, in fact, the two models cannot describe separately the social reality and social conflict by default, so there is a need to understand modern society by integrating elements of both theories, focusing on understanding the relations of domination and subordination between individuals. In theory of the conflict proposed by Dahrendorf (1958), the focus is not on the economic sphere of society, as in Marxist theory, but on elements of the social structure in general, aiming to identify those social structures where there is some degree of control. The idea of class conflict and possession of property is replaced with the authority, where social inequalities are caused by withhold of authority or lack of authority. According to this theory, social conflicts have a structural origin in the distribution of social roles and implicit of the authority and social power. According to the author, class conflicts are explained by the structure of domination existing in a society, but, it must be taken into account the social, political and economic context of each particular society at a particular time.

For Dahrendorf, a systematic theory of the conflict should meet the following requirements: be made with reference to plausible explanations and demonstrable empirical phenomena; elements of the theory of conflict must not contradict the conflict model of society; categories used should, if possible, be consistent with the theory of integration or, at least, be in correspondence with them; a theory of conflict should allow the social conflicts that derive from structures and social arrangements; a theory of conflict should explain the multitude of conflict types and variations in intensity. The author continues his argument noting that achieving these requirements is only possible by developing a theory that discusses the structural causes of social conflict and conflict between groups. As with the theories presented above, Dahrendorf approaches the social conflict by formulating several central questions that the theory of conflict has to answer. a) How conflict groups are formed as a result of the structure of society? b) What forms can take conflicts between these groups? c) How does the conflict between these groups causes a change in the social structure?

Like most theorists of conflict, Dahrendorf also focuses on macro-social structure. Thus, group conflict is defined as an antagonistic relationship between individuals organized collectively that can be explained in terms of social structure and class conflict (Dahrendorf, 1976). In his analysis of conflict, Dahrendorf identifies the different roles of power in society, but it is very critical in terms of identification of conflict at individual level (Jehn, 1997). He says, also, that there are several preconditions in developing a theory of social conflict. First, it requires reaching a concept applicable to the phenomena and a distinction between the most important types. Another requirement would be to create a conception of society which is compatible with the study of conflict (Jehn, 1997).

According to McNeill (1965), Dahrendorf has identified preconditions of conflict by asking questions like: *What are the structural conditions that induce various forms of conflict?* or *How does the conflict develop starting from those forms?*

In theory, Dahrendorf, shifts the attention from the economic to the social structure of society and particularly on those social structures in which there is some degree of control. The core of his analysis is the power linked to the individual's position in life (Havenga, 2004). It is expected that people in positions of power to exercise authority over those under control. These people dominate others as a consequence of expectations and not as a consequence of psychosocial characteristics (Jordaan, 1993). Therefore, power is not a constant factor and requires subordination and control. Going forward, we can say that a position is invested with power and not a person. Power is a factual relationship, while the authority is a legal relationship characterized by domination and subordination. Authority can be seen as a legal power (Havenga, 2004). Referring to Dahrendorf's approach of "power", Lopreato and Hazelrigg (1972) consider that "power" is a dichotomous character or a dual nature. Power management represents any coordinated association which can be split between two groups (Dahrendorf, 1976). He is not interested if people possess more or less power in a given situation. The biggest difference consists between individuals who have a certain degree of power and individuals who have no power. Starting from this premise, it is obvious that power can be a sustainable source of conflict (Havenga, 2004). Dahrendorf believes that social norms are not determined nor come from collective consensus. In his view, the rules are determined and maintained by power structures and the substance can be described in terms of the power of involved interests (Rummel, 1977).

Dahrendorf refers to two types of inequalities that are found in all known societies. The first is inequality factors of production, which is the cause of social conflict and change. One consequence of this type of inequality is what is called distribution of inequality. The second type is the power inequality. This inequality is derived from the inequality of production factors and generates class struggle. Unequal distribution of social rewards, as income, prestige and power, represents distribution inequalities basis. Thus, a clear distinction can be drawn between the classes who hold power, on one hand, and the prestige and wealth, on the other hand (Havenga, 2004). Social stratification leads to control social behaviour through positive and negative sanction and so eases the installation of power (Dahrendorf, 1976). Dahrendorf's theory is not limited to capitalist societies. Since the distribution of roles of authority is the difference between classes, classes and class conflict exists in communist or socialist societies. Classes exist because there exists the ones who dominate by the virtue of legitimacy provided by position (the plant manager, the party chief, the mayor or General, etc.) and those who are in subordinated positions (citizen, worker, peasant, etc.) (Rummel, 1977).

Summing, elements of the model proposed by Dahrendorf (1958), the concepts of power and authority, are central in understanding social conflicts. Also, social conflict has a

dual role in social structures, in the sense that is not only integrative force, but also a source of conflicts (Weingart, 1969). The main criticism of the theory formulated by Dahrendorf (1958) is that is not able to overcome the limits encountered in Marxist theory which tried to oppose, namely the incorporation of the concept of social change that transcends social structures (Weingart, 1969).

### **Karl Marx and the Theory of Conflict**

In a Marxist framework, society is characterized by the relationship between social classes, which he divided into proletarian and bourgeois, and, especially, the fight between them, seen as the engine of change. His theory is not one of balance or consensus, but its relevance to contemporary theories of social conflicts is undeniable. In this regard, Ashley and Orenstein (1995) stated that: "In the twentieth century, many revolutionaries, workers and intellectuals agreed with Jean-Paul Sartre's opinion that Marxism is a philosophy needed our times. Both as a political philosophy and also as theory of revolutionary change ... this theory believed that it will change the world" (pp. 249-250). Jordaan (1993) argues that, despite that some concepts like "class antagonism", "revolution", "war" and "civil war" were commonly used by Marx, the concept of "conflict" is the one to whom it gives a comprehensive structure that has been used with greater freedom. The main features of Marx' conflict assumes that this is the result of confrontation of interests and antagonisms between the two sides. Although he used terms such as "conflict", "antagonism" or "fight" as synonyms, he did not suggest that they refer to "violence". Violence can be seen either latent or manifest in each of the various classes, that may be, in turn, in a passive state and an active one (Havenga, 2004).

Marx focused his work on the analysis of phenomena related to social conflict and change, reaching to create a simple concept of structuring the classes in the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Between them he introduced the intermediate class, the petty bourgeoisie, represented by owners of restaurants and shops, retailers and other similar groups. In the definition of classes, the bourgeoisie are those individuals privileged that have at their disposal various resources. On the opposite, the proletariat is represented by those underprivileged groups who have little or no resources, their work being the only resource they have and which they offer in exchange for material benefits and compensation (Dahrendorf, 1976). A possible definition of Marxist perception of classes is given by Lopreato and Hazelrigg (1972) "class is a group of people who have a common relationship with the means of production, the structure of political power and ideas of time that inevitably in the situation of conflict with another group who has ideas and interests different about the economic and political structures" (p. 19). It may be deduced, therefore, that a conflict develops between different classes as a result that individuals or groups differs from them in several ways. According to Marx, the extreme form of conflict is violent revolution, which is a logical result of what he understood by materialist concept.

Marx's fundamental objective, in terms of conflict, was to find the necessary clarifications for a stability mechanism and social change that overthrows the capitalist system (Gruber 2000). To support his vision of conflict, Marx made some statements about the man and the world, well summarized by Cuff and Payne (1984). Throughout these statements, Marx acknowledges that the world, including the social world, is characterized by instability rather than stability. Moreover, change does not occur in society or in the world by chance, but occurs in an orderly manner, allowing observation of a certain degree of uniformity and settlement. In the same lines, economic order, or in other words, the world of work, allows identifying a pattern of change. Each community must earn its living and how they do this has a major influence on the community structure seen as a whole. Furthermore, community consists of different interdependent parts that interact based on economic considerations, while social institutions are seen as responsible for the attitudes and behaviour of individuals within communities. For Marx, the individual exists as a rational being, intelligent and sensitive. These characteristics can, however, be distorted if the community social rules are not sufficiently well developed. In this case, the man will put his own interests above the interests of others, and the result will be a conflict (Cuff & Payne, 1984).

Add to previous assumptions, a critical perspective on the conflict applies in the Marxist view on labour relations, especially when talking about the concepts of humanization and dehumanization through labour (Moberg, 2001). Accordingly, when consciousness of class is increasing, and also the exploitation and the alienation of proletarians by bourgeois, the polarization will occur more easily. This causes more intense conflicts and fierce competition among individuals or groups for scarce resources (Turner, 1991). In addition, as the limited sharing of resources between bourgeoisie and proletariat is uneven, the conflict between the two classes will be more virulent. The intensity of the conflict will determine the degree of redistributed resources.

We conclude that, in terms of the conflict, Marx was one of the most important promoters of this idea, accepting it as one of the dominant interactional processes of life. His approach to the conflict was transformed in an attempt to understand in a period of great institutional and political confusion, the mechanisms of development and control of social change.

### **Comparison Between Marx and Dahrendorf's Theories**

A legitimate question is whether Marx's theory has any value to political and economic sciences. Any response must take into account the fact that, first, Marx's work should be analysed as a whole and then seen throughout the writings of his contemporaries (Stones, 1998). In this way, as well as Friedrich Engels' theories, Marx's theories explain institutionalized social inequalities and their complementary phenomena. Secondly, it can be said that his reflections don't hide the simple characteristics of the human con-

flict and social change which are inherent to the system of inequalities (Lopreato & Hazelrig, 1972). According to McNeill (1965), the most influential theory of social conflict was Marx's, despite the fact that the approach was more hypothetical, rather than one demonstrated in practice. Even if his theory has not provided solutions to conflict, seen from all angles of approach, it nevertheless provides a real basis for the development of sociological theories of conflict. Havenga (2004) criticizes the conflict theory proposed by Marx and shows that Marx did not provide accurately certain changes that occur while the working class operates within a capitalist system. Moreover, he did not accept that human beings are by their nature subject to error.

Trying a comparative approach to the differences and similarities between the theories of Marx and Dahrendorf, Lopreato and Hazelrig, 1972 suggest that both approaches focused on the struggle between those who "hold" and those who „don't hold" as a central element for structural changes within communities. In contrast to Marx, Dahrendorf sees that the real difference between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat is not that much the property ownership, but the authority, seen as a political power. The theoretical model of Dahrendorf is concentrated more on the social phenomena. Such a phenomenon is the „image" (perception) of a social structure that a community can accept and which can be considered a political association (Lopreato & Hazelrig, 1972). Bartos and Wehr (2002), consider that there is a lack in Dahrendorf's explanations on establishing clear lines of mobilizing the potential group conflicts. Regarding the logical structure of Dahrendorf's theory about class and class conflict, compared to that of Marx, the basic difference between the two lies in the structural determinants of classes. Dahrendorf considers Marx criteria related to private property as a mean of production not being viable because limits the application of the class theory. Lopreato and Hazelrigg (1972), observing the differences between the two visions said that: "(...) no matter what evidence there is in favour of building a theory of conflict based on a dichotomous division class, Marx's theories are more favourable than those of Dahrendorf" (p. 30).

Furthermore, Turner (1991) states that the bourgeoisie and the proletariat are not the only ones responsible for the apparent changes, while power and interests are not the main motivations of social behaviour. Also, the conflict does not always lead to revolution, boycotts, riots and strikes. The sociologist believes that the power of proactive collective comprehension is underestimated by both Marx and Dahrendorf and by other theorists of conflict. In addition, Ritzer (1992) criticizes that the conflict theoreticians do not pay enough attention to the element of transformation in their approaches.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Based on our theoretical discussion, we argue that Dahrendorf's theory is more general and so offers a broader explanation than that of Marx. While history proves that Marx was right when he spoke about the ruthless exploitation of workers in the capitalist

world of the nineteenth century, Dahrendorf observed that this did not happen only because capitalist owners had unlimited power and used it to their advantage, but also because they sought to achieve prosperity for their businesses, seen as a whole (Bartos & Wehr, 2002). Thus, incompatibility of objectives is not resulted just by the exploitation by those who have power, but also because the capitalist firms desire was to win prosperity, while workers sought to earn a decent salary. On the same lines, Lopreato and Hazelrigg (1972), underline the important contribution of Dahrendorf and state that in the current trend studies of social stratification there is a lack of continuity regarding Marx's work. In this sense, even if Dahrendorf's theory does not necessarily add a new chapter to the period inspired by Marx, it brings new spirit and provides sufficient tools to confer credibility to the Marxist heritage.

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