

[See this page in the course material.](#)

## Learning Outcomes

- Describe how functionalists, conflict theorists, and interactionists view government and politics

Sociologists rely on organizational frameworks or paradigms to make sense of their study of society. Already there are many widely recognized broad schemas for evaluating sociological data and observations. Each paradigm looks at the study of society through a unique lens. The sociological examination of government and power can thus be evaluated using a variety of perspectives that help the evaluator gain a broader understanding. Functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism are the three main philosophical stances in sociological practice today.

## Functionalism

According to functionalism, the government has four main purposes: planning and directing society, meeting social needs, maintaining law and order, and managing international relations. Recall also that according to functionalism, all aspects of society serve a purpose.

Functionalists view government and politics as a mechanism to enforce norms and regulate conflict; they seek consensus and order in society. Dysfunction creates social problems that lead to social change. Functionalists see active social change, such as the sit-in on Wall Street, as undesirable because it forces change and, as a result, undesirable things that might require adaptation from society. For instance, functionalists would see monetary political contributions as a way of keeping people connected to the democratic process; in other words, political contributions serve as a tool for connecting individuals to their government. This would be in opposition to a conflict theorist, who would see this financial contribution as a way for the rich to perpetuate their own wealth and to further accrue political advantage.

Try It

Which concept corresponds best to functionalism?

☐ Symbolism

[See this interactive in the course material.](#)

Which is not one of functionalism's four main purposes of government?

☐ Meeting social needs

[See this interactive in the course material.](#)

## Conflict Theory

Conflict theory focuses on the social inequalities and power difference within a group, analyzing society through this lens. Philosopher and social scientist Karl Marx is the primary influence on the conflict theory perspective; he viewed social structure, rather than individual personality characteristics, as the cause of many social problems, such as poverty and crime. Marx believed that conflict between groups struggling to either attain wealth and power or keep the wealth and power they had was inevitable in a capitalist society, and conflict was the only way for the underprivileged to eventually gain some measure of equality.

C. Wright Mills (1956) elaborated on some of Marx's concepts, coining the phrase "power elite"

to describe what he saw as the small group of powerful people who control much of a society. Mills believed the power elite use government to develop social policies that allow them to keep their wealth. While Marx argued that the small group at the top seeks power through wealth accumulation and security, Mills argued that the small group seeks economic, political, and social power. Contemporary theorist G. William Domhoff (2011) elaborated on ways in which the power elite may be seen as a subculture whose members follow similar social patterns such as joining elite clubs, attending select schools, and vacationing at a handful of exclusive destinations. This results in a social distance between groups, based on social, geographic, educational, political, and economic patterns of behavior.

### Link to Learning

If you're interested in learning more about how someone from the conflict perspective may think about power, you can watch this [video by We Are Change](#), who, as their name implies, are interested in defying the status quo and the elitist, competitive, societal structure by encouraging people to think differently about their social world.

## Conflict Theory in Action



**Figure 1.** Although military technology has evolved considerably over the course of history, the

fundamental causes of conflict among nations remain essentially the same: power. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

Even before there were modern nation-states, political conflicts arose among competing societies or factions of people. Vikings attacked continental European tribes in search of loot, and later, European explorers landed on foreign shores to claim the resources of indigenous groups. Conflicts also arose among competing groups within individual sovereignties, as evidenced by the bloody French Revolution. Nearly all conflicts in the past and present, however, are spurred by basic desires: the drive to protect or gain territory and wealth, and the need to preserve liberty and autonomy.

According to Marx, such conflicts are necessary, although ugly, steps toward a more egalitarian society. Marx saw a historical pattern in which revolutionaries toppled elite power structures, after which wealth and authority became more evenly dispersed among the population, and the overall social order advanced. In this pattern of change through conflict, people tend to gain greater personal freedom and economic stability (1848), and conflict is therefore necessary to progress as a society. (Here's something to think about—if conflict is a necessary mechanism for progress, doesn't that make conflict functional?)

Modern-day conflicts are still driven by the desire to gain or protect power and wealth, whether in the form of land and resources or in the form of liberty and autonomy. Internally, groups within the U.S. struggle within the system by trying to achieve the outcomes they prefer. Political differences over budget issues for border control, for example, led to the recent shutdown of the federal government that lasted 35 days at the beginning of 2019. Alternative political groups, such as the Tea Party and the Libertarian Party, are also gaining a significant following.

The Arab Spring exemplifies oppressed groups acting collectively to change their governmental systems, seeking both greater liberty and greater economic equity. Some nations, such as Tunisia and Egypt, have successfully transitioned to governmental change; others, like Syria, have not yet reached consensus on a new government.

Unfortunately, the change process in some countries reached the point of active combat between the established government and the portion of the population seeking change, often called revolutionaries or rebels. Libya and Syria are two such countries; the multifaceted nature of the conflict, with several groups and factions, both from the government and from the general population, competing for their own desired ends, makes creation of a peaceful resolution more challenging and violent conflict more complicated.

In the last 5 years, popular uprisings of citizens seeking governmental change have occurred in Bosnia, Brazil, Greece, Iran, Jordan, Portugal, Spain, Turkey, Venezuela, Ukraine, Hong Kong, and most recently in Armenia. Although much smaller in size and scope, demonstrations

take place regularly in the United States, and their frequency has increased and their causes expanded in scope. From Women's Marches, to March for Our Lives and Black Lives Matter, people protest government policy and action, whether that government be local, state, or federal. Some claim we live in a golden era of protests in the United States.<sup>[1]</sup>

The internal situation in Ukraine in 2014 was compounded by military aggression from neighboring Russia, which forcibly annexed the Crimean Peninsula—a geographic region of Ukraine—and threatened further military action in that area. This is an example of conflict driven by a desire to gain wealth and power in the form of land and resources. In order to maintain international order and to protect individuals, the United States and the European Union implemented economic sanctions against Russia.

Try It

Which sociologist is not associated with conflict theory?

☐ C. Wright Mills

[See this interactive in the course material.](#)

Karl Marx believed social structures evolve through:

☐ conflict

[See this interactive in the course material.](#)

The Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street protests, and the Tea Party movement have the following in common:

☐ They are examples of conflict theory in action.

[See this interactive in the course material.](#)



**Figure 2.** What symbols of the Boston Tea Party are represented in this painting? How might a symbolic interactionist explain the way the modern-day Tea Party has reclaimed and repurposed

these symbolic meanings? (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

## Symbolic Interactionism

Other sociologists study government and power by relying on the framework of symbolic interactionism, which is grounded in the works of Max Weber and George H. Mead.

Symbolic interactionism, as it pertains to government, focuses its attention on figures, emblems, or individuals that represent power and authority. Many diverse entities in larger society can be considered symbolic: trees, doves, wedding rings. Images that represent the power and authority of the United States include the White House, the eagle, and the American flag. The Seal of the President of the United States, along with the office in general, incites respect and reverence in many Americans and is a symbol of the United States around the world.

Symbolic interactionists are not interested in large-scale macro- structures such as the government. As micro-level sociologists, they are more interested in the face-to-face, interpersonal aspects of politics. In reality, much of politics consists of face-to-face backroom meetings and clandestine lobbyist efforts. Conversely, what the public typically sees is the less controversial media spectacle of speechmaking and ceremonial action from political leaders. Symbolic interactionists are most interested in the interaction between small groups who have the power to make decisions. The heart of politics, according to the symbolic interactionism perspective, is the result of interactions between individuals and small groups over time. These meetings produce new meanings and perspectives that individuals use to undertake political work.

### Link to Learning

Learn more about interest groups and politics in this [Crash Course video “Interest Groups”](#)—are you part of any interest group, whether you’re affiliated with them or not?

### Think It Over

- What is one criticism of functionalism?
- Explain what is meant by the term *power elite*. Consider its original intention as coined by C. Wright Mills as well as your understanding of it.

Try It

Sociologist G. William Domhoff's *Who Rules America?* asserts that wealth is often necessary to exert the most influence over social and political systems. This is a \_\_\_\_\_ perspective.

☐ conflict theory

[See this interactive in the course material.](#)

Which of the following paradigms would consider movements such as Occupy Wall Street undesirable and unnecessarily forcing social change?

☐ Functionalism

[See this interactive in the course material.](#)

glossary

power elite: a small group of powerful people who control much of a society

- 
1. Stewart, Emily (April 2018). Poll: More Americans are hitting the streets to protest in the



era of Trump. Vox. Retrieved from  
<https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/4/7/17209710/trump-protest-poll> \_

## Licenses and Attributions

### CC licensed content, Original

- Modification, adaptation, and original content. **Authored by:** Florencia Silveira for Lumen Learning. **Provided by:** Lumen Learning. **License:** [CC BY: Attribution](#)

### CC licensed content, Shared previously

- Theoretical Perspectives on Government and Power. **Authored by:** OpenStax CNX.  
**Located at:**  
<https://cnx.org/contents/AgQDEnLI@10.1:IA3mBOAb@2/Theoretical-Perspectives-on-Government-and-Power>. **License:** [CC BY: Attribution](#). **License Terms:** Download for free at <http://cnx.org/contents/02040312-72c8-441e-a685-20e9333f3e1d@3.49>

</div