Original Paper

Plasticity of Contemporary Racism: Functionalist Orientation Anomalies and Emergence of Social Conflict Theory

Antonio Lopez[1][*]

[1] Doctor by Francisco de Vitoria University, Madrid, Spain; Ph.D. researcher at the University of Deusto, Bilbao, Spain

[*] Antonio Lopez, Doctor by Francisco de Vitoria University, Madrid, Spain; Ph.D. researcher at the University of Deusto, Bilbao, Spain

Abstract

During the last century, sociological functionalism has been a sociological dominant interpretation. This trend has also developed within anthropology, biology, and the social sciences in general. Since the first evolutionary considerations, social interaction has been commonly interpreted from functional premises. In this way, racism as a social aversion has been seen as a consequence of the natural functioning of human societies. The present study contrasts the functionalist vision with the social conflict approach to evaluate each theoretical procedure. The research conclusions suggest that social conflict is capable of offering successful results on the nature of contemporary racism. However, there is currently a lack of research on the appropriateness of each of the approaches. The present work suggests to continue research of each orientation and particularly the use of social conflict as an analytical orientation.

Keywords

racism, functionalism, social conflict, sociology, plasticity

1. Introduction

Different periods have been proposed to locate the birth of sociological functionalism. One of the problems in dealing with its origin is the interrelationship between anthropology, philosophy, and sociology. Each of the areas has made contributions and defined theoretical gaps. Likewise, two historical moments can be considered the origin of functionalism. With preludes in the work of Jeremy Bentham—and subsequent contributions by John Stuart Mill and Thomas Henry Huxley—functionalism can be traced back to the mid-19th century, with the ideas of Auguste Comte

(1853), Herber Spencer (1855, 1873, 1876-1896), and Lester F. Ward (1883). At the end of the same century with the philosophy of Émile Durkheim (1893, 1895), and subsequently with the ethnography of Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown (1922, 1931, 1952) and the sociology of Talcott Parsons (1951, 1977), can be located their theoretical foundations.

The functionalist orientation premises are characterized by explaining the behavior of human societies based on their psychology. Therefore, it is not surprising that future titles of works such as that of the psychologist William James (1890) coincided with the book published by Spencer in 1855, *The Principles of Psychology*. This historical moment can be considered the founder of evolutionary psychology, with works such as Spencer and James (see also Bergson, 1907; McDougall, 1908; Dewey, 1910) being the basis of sociological functionalism. Evolutionary psychology, prevalent between the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th—subsequently lost strength in favor of the behavioral psychology founded by John B. Watson (1913) and anticipated by Ivan Pávlov (1883)—applied Darwinian principles on human thought. Among its premises were mostly four: the first considered society as an «organism», the second held that social elements developed their existence mechanically and teleologically, the third argued that social members were intended to merge, integrate and stabilize the system avoiding isolation and adapting to the environment (on which the ideas of «coadaptation» and «fusion» were also proposed), and finally, that a social system was aimed at the conservation and existence of the social institutions to reproduce itself. From all these premises, functionalism infers that positivism can interpret human historical reality because it acts functionally.

The Theory of social conflict, for its part, has preludes in the thought of Hegel (1807, 1820), but anchors its roots in the ideas of Karl Marx (1859) and Engels (Marx & Engels, 1845, 1848) and Ludwig Gumplowicz (1885, 1887). Later, the Theory was developed by the German-British scholar Ralf Dahrendorf (1957, 1972) from a socio-political perspective, the anthropology of the South African Max Gluckman (1963, 1965), the sociology of the American Lewis A. Coser (1956, 1967), and that of the emeritus professor of the University of Pennsylvania, Randall Collins (1975, 1998).

Orientations based on social conflict, consider that there is no real social harmony. In return, the position conceives cultural reality as mired in a continuous contradiction of interests. This contradiction is expressed socially in the form of economic, class, and political antagonism. This antagonism perpetuates the dichotomy between nature and social constructions, considering that social history reproduces the inequality of existence's vital conditions. Although there are innumerable theoretical principles about social conflict, four, in particular, are relevant: the first indicates that institutionalism has been built to disorganize human relations, solidify stratification, and continues to define new needs through prestige, property, values; the second presupposes that there are perpetual conflicts of a psychological nature within the individual, conflicts between groups of individuals, and conflicts between the system and the individual; the third principle holds that the private property of the means

of production fosters an unavoidable conflict between human interests; and the fourth argues that the social system, paradoxically, reproduces the conflict either by maintaining the *statu quo* or by wanting to overturn it.

2. Approaches and methodology

Much of the theoretical assumptions related to functionalism have shared ideas with social conflict. For example, Marx and Max Weber shared principles about their anti-positivism but differences in social classes' homogeneity. Other authors, such as Gumplowicz, shared both Marxist and functionalism (mainly Darwinian) ideas about conflict. Gumplowicz considers, for example, the struggle for survival centrally, upholding the primacy of conflict and then the Darwinian «optimistic» teleology (1875, 1883). However, one of the most recurrent dynamics of social conflict and functionalism has been addressing the existing contradictions of racial strife.

The functionalist analysis of racism, prevalent between the 1940s-1960s, was founded with the race relations of Robert Ezra Park and other authors such as Booker T. Washington or Ernest Watson Burgess (see Park & Washington, 1912; Park & Burgess, 1921; Park, 1922) and the political sociology of Max Weber (1924, 1919/1946). Various authors developed later «pure» functionalism, such as Elie Kedourie, J. H. Kautsky, S. N. Eisenstadt, W. C. Smith, Peter Worsley, Ernest Gellner, Karl Deutsch, and specially Talcott Parsons and Robert King Merton. Its relationship with racism was continued centrally by the neo-colonial paradigm that emerged between the 1950s-1960s. Several authors, such as Aimé Césaire, Albert Memmi, Franz Fanon, and Edward Said assumed functionalism principles. From the 1970s, the neo-colonial paradigm was relatively continued by the world-system approach of authors such as Immanuel Wallerstein, Albert Szymanski, Étienne Balibar, Eugene Genovese, and Giovanni Arrighi—as well as authors such as Samir Amin who shared principles of both. However, the American sociologist Oliver Cox (relatively) and the British sociologist Michael Banton, were who developed functionalism directly applied to racism during the second part of the 20th century.

Given its theoretical eclecticism, this type of analysis combines diverse interpretative views on the functional nature of contemporary racism. The neocolonial paradigm emphasizes the role of oppressed memory. For his part, the world-system approach holds that Eurocentric expansion is the key when explaining racism. Both analysis, however, are based relatively on two functionalist principles: the first, based on a Weberian, political and evolutionary nature, presupposes that it is the nation-states and their needs that determine racism; the second, founded by Robert Park, has an anthropological and sociological nature and considers that the racialized individual finally assimilates racialization and his inferior condition.

Since its founding, functionalism embraced a Weberian form. This means that the ideas of Max Weber profusely defined the principles of racial functionalism. Among the central considerations was the

analysis of racism based on ethnicity, primarily through the German study of the «Polish question» and the American research of Park and others of the «Negro question.» The principles of race relations were based on Park's division, who maintained that there were four parts within the racial process: competition, conflict, accommodation, and assimilation. Park, with Burgess, affirmed that the assimilation of the immigrant was a «process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes [...] by sharing their experience and history are incorporated with them in a common cultural life». Park's anthropological ideas and Weber's ones established the foundations of the later Race Relations theory or Race Relations cycle, a theoretical approach devised by Michael Banton in 1967. Banton argued that human beings acted under a pragmatic orientation based on the «rational choice» (1967, 1970 & see also 2008).

Conflict-based racial analysis, for its part, presupposes that the economic system determines human and political thought. Besides, by derivation, moral conceptions—in our case, racists ideals—are historically sedimented within that thought. The social conflict approach conceives human relationships as a historical product constructed to perpetuate conflict between groups. From this orientation, it is argued that every social system fosters competitiveness as a theoretical and material basis for vital development. The Theory of social conflict lived its academic peak between the 1960s and 1980s, always discontinuous and unsystematic. The Theory or orientation was formally founded in 1956 with the Lewis A. Coser work *The functions of social conflict*. Coser's work continued Karl Marx's ideas on the contradictions between the owners of the means of production (the bourgeoisie) and the proletariat (the laborers). Between Marx and Coser, in addition to Gumplowicz, different sociologists emerged and argued that reality was primarily based on conflict. However, among all of them, functionalism tends to coexist with social conflict understood from a Marxist perspective. Among the scholars who developed their ideas based on the social conflict, we find Thomas N. Carver, Franklin H. Giddings, Edward A. Ross, Lester F. Ward, Albion W. Small, George E. Vincent, Thorstein Veblen or Edward C. Hayes.

Unlike sociological functionalism, however, the orientation of social conflict was more widely developed before than after Coser. One of the greatest exponents of the orientation was the previously mentioned Ludwig Gumplowicz. He argued that the foundation of all known societies was based on the conflict between ethnic groups, classes, politics, and lifeways. Gumplowicz argued that every modern institutional form had been constructed as a *resolution*, that is, a «consequence» of the conflict. In the twentieth century, the sociologist Charles Wright Mills considered that social conflict always remained on the increase as world institutions tended to merge to preserve their power (1951, 1956, 1959). Subsequently, the orientation of the social conflict has been disseminating within different analytical approaches. However, tremendously relevant work on racial conflict emerged in the late 1970s. For the most part, these works emanated from the 1973 book by Stephen Castles and Godula Kosack *Immigrant workers and class str. in Western Europe*.

Most of these works suggested that social conflict was not a consequence of cultural development but a premise imposed by capitalism. With the exhaustion of the colonial paradigm as an explanatory model of contemporary racism, the so-called Castles-Kosack 1973 analysis (see Cansinos, 2020a) allowed us to appreciate how conflict defined individuals' daily lives. Following John Rex and Robert Moore, the Castles-Kosack 1973 analysis assumed on the new race relations that «the total situation is essentially one of conflict; any fear, distrust or dislike of another ethnic group is sharpened by market competition. We found that under normal day-to-day conditions tenants and landlords deliberately avoided one another» (Rex & Moore, 1960, p. 138). Also, following scholar Michael Banton, they assumed that «the cause is in the subject, not in the object of prejudice. It is an irrational pathological phenomenon, arising from the individual's inadequacies and resulting in replaced aggression» (Banton, 1969, p. 30). They concluded that «in other words, the prejudiced person projects his own weakness and faults on to an outsider in an effort to safeguard the ego from inner conflict» (Castles & Kosack, 1973, p. 447). However, the Castles-Kosack 1973 analysis only preluded a few years earlier, the so-called Miles-Phizacklea 1977 paradigm (see Cansinos, 2020b). Robert Miles and Annie Phizacklea stated that the search of homogeneity creates conflict, and «[...] members of ethnic strata may pursue their political interests on an ethnic basis; [...] a specified political goal can be best attained by organizing and acting with other individuals who are defined as belonging to the same ethnic group» (Miles & Phizacklea, 1977, p. 495). Among the different advances of the 1973 and 1977 models, it was found that the integral unit of analysis to understand contemporary racism was not the «human races», but the labor force, migration, and the division of groups under economic interests of capital development. Likewise, it was assumed that racism was not solely an issue related to Eurocentrism or understandable through the center-periphery dynamics of the postcolonial vision.

3. Discussion

The discussion about the existence or not of social conflict is a relevant question. It is not a simple dichotomous between the presence or not of constant social strife. It would be analytically rude to deny the social existence of the human conflict. The discussion about social conflict lies in its degree and nature. The question is to discern if the social conflict is a cultural phenomenon created or natural, perpetual or occasional, necessary or dispensable. An appreciable discussion on such a relevant sociological aspect cannot simplify social conflict's significance within ideas such as conservation and progress, science or tradition, or heritage and creation. From a racial perspective, many academic works have tended to dichotomize the analysis of contemporary racism. Contradictions between the tribal/civil, isolated/socialized, rational/spiritual, modern/mythical, or the will and hope have been analyzed from a dichotomic way. However, acting in this way, racism's analysis avoids the causes and does not understand its relevance as a necessary social system product.

Both functionalist views and those based on social conflict coincide in identifying the strife within human groups. The main difference is found in the anthropological «optimism» or «pessimism» attributed to this conflict—also called teleological «optimism» or «pessimism.» Likewise, this difference is linked to the consideration of conflict as something premeditated or spontaneous, understanding the human being as a rational or irrational agent.

Despite the widespread rejection of racism in the present age, many scholars have considered that it constitutes a natural resolution of modern conflicts. In this way, these intellectuals have normalized their existence and nature. From the racial point of view, these academic strands emanate from the conservative ideas of the early twentieth century—supported in turn by social Darwinism—that assumed the individual agent as nationally mobilized by his creed, economy, religion, and language (see the origin in Weber, 1904/1949, 1923/2012, 1924; also see Norkus, 2004; Scaff, 2014; Brubaker, 2020). These ideas were no different from the imperialist chauvinism that emanated from Darwinism in its birth. It was based on inheritance, capital, and competition. Weber, regarding Darwinism, introduced specific theoretical ideas—spiritual ideas—about charisma, bureaucracy, patrimonialism, or asceticism. However, both approaches only followed a teleological line towards the nation as an «optimal» form of organization in an internationalized «Malthusian world».

Directly regarding racism, feedback between conservative American and German schools was evident. Both Weber and Robert Ezra Park (both born in 1864), and other functionalists, normalized racialization processes naturalizing anthropological requalification. This theoretical attitude caused various authors to qualify functionalism, which emanated from social Darwinism, as part of an imperialist and racist attitude during the 1980s (Schluchter, 1981; Mommsen, 1984; Theiner, 1987), 1990s (Abraham, 1991; Olsson, 1996; Balibar, 1999) and the new millennium (Zimmerman, 2006; Go, 2013; MacKay, 2019).

Authors who viewed social conflict from a pessimistic perspective consequently viewed the conflict as unfavorable. They denounced that Darwinism, «nationalized» by Weberianism and racialized by Park, was not a reality capable of «optimizing human progress.» On the contrary, they considered that there was a cultural and primarily political conflict created by capitalism. This system was self-perpetuating through the state and existential disorganization. In this way, it was understood that the reproduction of the system depended on its historical disorganization.

4. Findings

Even though functionalism and social conflict coincide in various respects, they are essentially two antithetical theoretical perspectives. Both orientations consider the social system as a functional *unit*. However, the social-conflict approach considers that, from a racial point of view, human groups do not merge with the system itself, nor do they integrate, but rather reproduce the conflict. A simple look at

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the historical past seems to be able to reaffirm this hypothesis. If racialized social groups could be incorporated into the social system, it would not continue to develop the conflict.

The functionalist perspective is benevolent with the conflict; it considers it a necessary and positive «contradiction» for social progress. The social conflict perspective, for its part, considers contradictions as something artificially generated in order to promote group disorganization. The famous American sociologist W. E. B. Dubois argued that in the United States of his time, there was a «double-consciousness.» Dubois referred to the «two identities» of the United States, one black and one white (Du Bois, 1898, 1899, 1903). These two identities could exponentially multiply where there are racial conflicts until we see how the conflict is the latent normality that only occasionally causes conflicts to explode. Regardless of the strict consideration of social identities applied to groups, the truth is that reproduced, incidentally, and historically, hostility as a permanent kind of conflict. Despite the nation-states' efforts to «nationalize» normality, the truth is that the states and confederations themselves experience constant tensions both within their borders and in their limits. The tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea, Pakistan and China, Catalonia and Spain, or Armenia and Azerbaijan, have only received a more significant communicative role in recent decades than the previous tensions between Israel and Palestine, Ireland and the United Kingdom, Pakistan and India, or Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Why is this happening? The political phenomena that emanate from legality, officiality, citizenship, or the constitution (*gesatzterVerfassung*)—regardless of territoriality and tradition—seem more like a consequence than a type of will of the State. What emanates from statism should be rightly considered as an attempt to regulate the conflict, without its ultimate goal is to eliminate it. As a premise of the capitalist, based on competition, and the Darwinian ideals, based on confrontation, the system's nature encourages organizational contradictions as a mode of natural development.

5. Conclusions

Racism understood as a natural consequence of the system's contradictions can only be understood in a plastic way. Ideas about social conflict as a cultural constant have been widely endorsed today (Bowser, 2017; Pi & Zhang, 2017; Rinker & Lawer, 2018). One of the consequences of permanent social conflict is the explosion of violent revolutions between opposing groups, the rejection of constant cooperation, and social inequality reproduction. In this sense, «the declining significance of [terms as] race, symbolic racism, color-blind racism, and unconscious racism [...] mask indirect and covert ways to continue racial oppression» (Bowser, 2017, p. 1). As the last part of a composition of three articles, the present work suggests that racism, as a millenary social aversion, will only remit if its nature based on plasticity is assumed in future research. Behind its multiple and variable forms underlies the classic conception of «Western singularity» that presupposes European values' superior rationality or the

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so-called «Hellenic mind.» Such «uniqueness» was created, from a philosophical perspective, by the traditional Germanic conservatism of the idealism of G. W. F. Hegel and the Polish Lutheran theologian and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher. Later, it was continued by the French historian Jules Michelet and the German philosopher Karl Rosenkranz. Social Darwinism later offered its scientific-cultural support as a part of Liberalism. On these ideals, Max Weber (1919/2015, 1921-22/2019)—always intermittently and occasionally ambiguously—and other scholars enhanced the conservatism that emanated from the classical Prussian State as the realization of rationality, as well as its «character», «blood», and «adaptability».

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