

Social Conflict Theory: A Critical Framework for Understanding Inequality and Driving Peacebuilding in Kenya and Beyond

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Abstract: This paper examines social conflict theory as a critical lens for analyzing structural inequalities, power dynamics, and institutional oppression. It traces the evolution of the theory from its classical Marxist foundations to its modern applications, emphasizing its relevance in the context of contemporary Kenya. By incorporating real-world examples—particularly within Kenya's political, economic, and correctional systems—the paper explores the role of social conflict in both sustaining and transforming society. It further explores the theory's practical applications in peacebuilding, justice reform, and inclusive governance, highlighting its value for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners alike.

Keywords: Social Conflict Theory Structural Inequality Power Dynamics Institutional Oppression Marxist Theory

1. Definition: The Philosophy of Social Conflict Theory

Social conflict theory, in the tradition of peace philosophy, can be defined as the conceptual framework that views conflict as a catalyst for exposing and addressing structural inequalities within society. It sees social life not as a harmonious whole but as a battleground where marginalized and dominant groups contest the distribution of resources, rights, and recognition. In this view, conflict is not inherently negative; rather, it is a mechanism through which justice can emerge when institutions and relationships are restructured to reflect equity and dignity for all.

In the Kenyan context, this philosophical perspective provides a lens through which we can critically analyze systemic inequality—whether in land ownership, political representation, access to justice, or economic opportunity. It challenges narratives that treat social unrest as criminal behaviour rather than a legitimate response to long-standing injustice.

2. Dearth of Philosophical Application in Contemporary Policy

Despite its explanatory power, social conflict theory has been underutilized in practical peacebuilding and correctional justice frameworks, especially within Kenya. The dominant approaches in public policy and justice reform often emphasize consensus, legalism, or punitive models that fail to account for underlying power asymmetries.

This dearth is evident in the criminal justice system, where retributive practices remain the norm. Over 70% of Kenya's prison population consists of poor, young men from informal settlements (Kenya Prisons Service, 2021). Rather than viewing this as a structural issue rooted in inequality, the system treats it as individual moral failure. Similarly, peacebuilding initiatives frequently focus on ethnic harmony without addressing land dispossession, elite corruption, or economic exclusion.

Without a philosophical grounding that recognizes conflict as an expression of systemic injustice, such reforms remain superficial and unsustainable.

3. Rationale for a Conflict-Centered Peace Philosophy

The justification for a conflict-based philosophy in peace and justice reform lies in its potential to illuminate the root causes of violence, poverty, and exclusion. A philosophy grounded in social conflict theory compels society to interrogate who holds power, how that power is used, and who is excluded from its benefits.

Recent events, such as the **#RejectFinanceBill2023** protests, revealed the frustrations of youth and working-class populations with rising inequality and elite control over public resources. Movements such as **#EndFemicideKE** and **#EndPoliceBrutalityKE** underscore the urgency of this perspective. These are not random outbursts but organized responses to systemic disenfranchisement. Similarly, ethnic marginalization in northern Kenya, police brutality in urban settlements, and gender-based violence underscore systemic failures that cannot be resolved through surface-level reforms.

A conflict philosophy urges policymakers to pursue **structural transformation** rather than **behavioural correction**, making it essential for peacebuilders seeking long-term change.

4. The Expansive Nature of Social Conflict Theory

A central challenge of adopting this philosophy is its breadth. Social conflict theory spans disciplines: sociology, political science, feminist theory, critical race theory, and criminology. Each brings unique insights into how power and injustice manifest in different domains.

In Kenya, the expansive nature of the theory is evident in diverse struggles:

- **Land conflicts** in Rift Valley and Coastal regions reflect colonial legacies and contemporary dispossession.
- **Tribalized politics** - Ethnic patronage systems that shape public appointments and electoral violence - (access to public goods and political power).
- **Gender movements** like #EndFemicideKE, demanding state accountability for violence against women exposing the intersection of patriarchy and state failure.
- **Economic disempowerment** of youth and women, visible in their limited access to land, credit, and representation.

This breadth can overwhelm policymakers seeking clear, immediate solutions, but it also allows for a holistic approach to peace—one that understands peace not merely as the absence of war, but the presence of justice, dignity, and equity across all spheres of life.

5. Philosophical Traditions Supporting a Conflict-Based Peace Ethic

5.1 Marxism

Karl Marx's theory of class conflict remains foundational. The divide between Kenya's political-business elite and the working poor, as seen in informal employment struggles and tax protests, reflects this class antagonism (Marx & Engels, 1848/2008).

5.2 Weberian Sociology

Max Weber introduced the idea that inequality includes class, status, and party. In Kenya, tribal identity often substitutes for social status, and access to state power is mediated through ethnic networks (Weber, 1922/1978).

5.3 Power Elite Theory

C. Wright Mills' concept of the power elite is exemplified in Kenya's postcolonial political economy, where a handful of families and corporations influence policy and governance (Mills, 1956).

5.4 Critical Race and Postcolonial Theories

W.E.B. Du Bois's and Frantz Fanon's works parallel the experiences of Kenya's marginalized communities, particularly in northern regions, where development lags and state services are minimal.

5.5 Radical Feminism

Radical feminists like Jelena Vukoicic highlight the structural nature of patriarchy. In Kenya, movements such as #JusticeForNaomi reveal the systemic failures of law enforcement and judiciary in protecting women.

5.6 Gramscian Hegemony

Antonio Gramsci's concept of ideological control is relevant to how state and elite actors control narratives, especially during elections or national crises, through media and education (Gramsci, 1971). These traditions collectively argue that peace cannot be achieved without confronting deep-seated structures of domination in all its forms—economic, ethnic, gendered, and political.

6. Toward a Peacebuilding Framework Grounded in Social Conflict Theory

6.1 Wealth Redistribution

Redistributive justice is key to structural peace. Kenya's affirmative action programs such as the National Government Affirmative Action Fund (NGAAF), and Youth Enterprise Fund are steps toward economic inclusion but remain hindered by elite capture and poor transparency (Oxfam, 2023).

6.2 Power Rebalancing

The implementation of the two-thirds gender rule and youth representation in policy processes are crucial. Without institutionalizing power-sharing, peace remains fragile and exclusion persistent.

6.3 Institutional Reform

True peacebuilding requires reform of policing, judicial, and correctional systems. Restorative justice, community policing, and rehabilitation-focused prison programs must replace punitive approaches.

6.4 Nonviolent Conflict Resolution

Kenya's National Dialogue processes and the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC) demonstrate the possibility of peaceful mediation. The 2008 Kofi Annan-led peace talks are a historical example of successful nonviolent conflict resolution aligned with conflict theory principles.

7. Conclusion

Social conflict theory offers a philosophically rich and practically urgent framework for peacebuilding and justice reform. By recognizing conflict as a symptom of deeper inequalities rather than a disruption of harmony, it equips us to build institutions and cultures that prioritize justice over order, inclusion over stability, and transformation over containment.

In Kenya, where inequality, corruption, and exclusion remain persistent, this philosophy holds the potential to shift national discourse from managing dissent to fostering equity. As peace educators, policymakers, and civil society actors grapple with Kenya's challenges, conflict theory can serve not just as a critique, but as a guide for reconstructing society on foundations of justice and peace.

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