



## CONFLICT AND REPRESENTATION: DAHRENDORF'S THEORY IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY POPULISM

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### Abstract

Based on an extensive literature review, this article examines Ralf Dahrendorf's theory of social conflict in the context of contemporary populism. It aims to explore Dahrendorf's view on the inherent nature of conflict in modern societies and how this phenomenon can help to understand populist dynamics, particularly regarding the relationship between elites and subordinate groups. The (contemporary) city, a stage for multiple confrontations and tensions that divide society into hierarchical groups, is not merely a physical place but a field of social and political representation where rights and access to the 'commons' – understood as shared spaces and resources – are contested and reconfigured. Based on the argument that populist leaders exacerbate latent social conflicts by fostering a divide between the "people" and the "elites", creating an antagonism that rallies society around a polarising narrative, this article analyses not only examples of contemporary populism, but also the manipulation of social and political representations driven by democratic instability.

**Key-words:** Dahrendorf; Social conflict theory; Contemporary populism.

## CONFLITO E REPRESENTAÇÃO: A TEORIA DE DAHRENDORF NO CONTEXTO DO POPULISMO CONTEMPORÂNEO

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### Resumo

A partir de uma revisão literária profunda, o artigo explora a teoria do conflito social de Ralf Dahrendorf no contexto do populismo contemporâneo, procurando discutir a visão do teórico relativamente à natureza inerente do conflito nas sociedades modernas e o modo como este fenómeno pode ajudar a compreender as dinâmicas populistas, especialmente no que tange a relação entre elites e grupos subordinados. A cidade (contemporânea), um palco de múltiplos confrontos e tensões que dividem a sociedade em grupos hierárquicos, não é apenas um local físico, mas um campo de representação social e política onde os direitos e acessos ao 'comum' – entendidos como espaços e recursos partilhados – são contestados e reconfigurados. Segundo o argumento que líderes populistas exacerbam conflitos sociais latentes ao promover uma divisão entre o "povo" e as "elites", criando um antagonismo que mobiliza a sociedade em torno de uma narrativa polarizadora, são analisados, ao longo deste documento, não só exemplos contemporâneos de populismo, como de manipulação das representações sociais e políticas como crescendo de instabilidade democrática.

**Palavras-chave:** Dahrendorf; Teoria do conflito social; Populismo contemporâneo.

## Introduction

Over the last few decades, populism has emerged in contemporary societies as a dominant political force, reconfiguring the democratic landscape and amplifying social tensions across various parts of the world. Thus, it seems increasingly important to invest in studies that critically examine and question the well-known Theories of Social Conflict, aimed at understanding the dynamics that fuel contemporary populism.

Ralf Dahrendorf was a sociologist who is generally acknowledged for his efforts to theoretically analyse the various elements that constitute and shape societies. Contrary to traditional Marxist views, “modern social conflict is about attacking the inequalities that restrict full civic participation by social, economic and political means, and establishing the entitlements that make up a rich and full status of citizenship” (Dahrendorf, 1988, p. 52). According to Dahrendorf, society remains in a constant state of tension between two opposing principles: order and conflict. While order is essential to maintain social cohesion, conflict arises from inequalities in power distribution, leading oppressed groups to oppose the established elites.

When initially analysing populism through Dahrendorf's perspective, opinion leaders could be viewed as the voice of latent social conflicts. The rhetoric they employ simplifies and exacerbates these divisions, framing the working class in opposition to a group of elites who control and sustain political, economic, and cultural power (see Marx & Engels, 1848; Dahrendorf, 1958; Dahrendorf, 1959). As Ernesto Laclau (2005) suggests, populism operates on the basis of a social dichotomy, creating an antagonism that mobilises dissatisfied sectors of society. This mechanism of polarisation and representation of social conflicts, present in both Dahrendorf and populist practices, is the focus of this article. This review, therefore, aims to explore how Dahrendorf's theory of conflict can be applied to understanding contemporary populism, especially regarding how power relations are manipulated, and political representations are built. Drawing on Dahrendorf's theory, the goal is

to offer a critical reading of populism as a strategy that exacerbates the tensions within modern societies and challenges the very legitimacy of democratic institutions.

The rise of populism in contemporary democracies represents a peculiar manifestation of social conflicts that are deeply rooted in power structures and the dynamics of inequality (see Laclau, 2005; Moffitt, 2016; Müller, 2016; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Mouffe, 2018). At the heart of these tensions lies the classic opposition between dominant and subordinate groups, a duality that is central to theories of social conflict, which are extensively explored in sociology, political philosophy, and the social sciences. Dahrendorf's approach posits that modern societies, inherently structured around hierarchies of authority and power, are destined for conflict between those who control resources and those who challenge them (see Dahrendorf, 1959). Contemporary populism can be interpreted as a manifestation of the latent conflicts that Dahrendorf identified as a permanent feature of advanced industrial societies, now expressed through political movements that claim the “true will of the people” in opposition to elites perceived as corrupt and detached.

Unlike Karl Marx, Dahrendorf (1959) argues that conflict is not primarily a result of relations of production, but rather of the unequal distribution of authority and legitimacy within social organisations. By deviating from a purely economic reading of social antagonisms, Dahrendorf suggests that conflict incorporates a normative and institutional dimension, highlighting the importance of binding norms that sustain the social order. By challenging these norms and proposing a new order based on a Manichaeic dogma of “us versus them”, populism embodies what Chantal Mouffe (2018) describes as the “antagonistic conflict” inherent in democratic politics. Hence, populism becomes a phenomenon of protest against both the political elites and the very norms that govern democratic coexistence.

According to Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2017), populism is an essentially ambiguous concept that can either strengthen or undermine democratic institutions, depending on

the context and the strategies adopted by populist actors. This ambiguity demands an approach that goes beyond the structural analysis of authority relations, also incorporating the rhetorical and symbolic spheres of conflict. As Ernesto Laclau (2005) argues, populism must be understood as a hegemonic phenomenon that constructs a “people” through chains of discursive equivalences, challenging the existing cultural and political hegemony. Thus, by employing a discourse of “authentic” representation, populist movements not only channel latent social conflicts, but also create new forms of political subjectivity.

### Modern Social Conflict - Dahrendorf's vision

Ralf Dahrendorf is widely recognised for his contributions to the study of modern societies from a perspective of conflict, offering an alternative to the functionalist approaches that dominated mid-20<sup>th</sup> century sociology. While modern theorists known for their structural-functionalist views, such as Talcott Parsons, have emphasised social order and stability, Dahrendorf proposes that conflict and order are essential and inevitable features of social life, arguing that “authority is a characteristic of social organizations as general as society itself” (Dahrendorf, 1959, p. 168).

It is in this critical context that the sociologist develops a theory of social conflict that departs from the traditional Marxist view. While he recognises that class divisions are an important source of tension, Dahrendorf rejects the idea that the class struggle is the sole or even the primary form of conflict. For him, societies are marked by a plurality of conflicts that emerge from different spheres of life, such as politics, the economy, and social institutions. The emphasis is on the idea that “conflict involves a striving for scarce resources. From the point of view of linguistic usage, it is perfectly proper to say that conflicting interest groups compete for power” (Dahrendorf, 1959, p. 209), i.e., power is unequally distributed between dominant and subordinate groups, inevitably leading to tensions and disputes.

One of the author's theoretical innovations was the introduction of the concept of conflicting social roles. Modern industrial societies are made up of a series of voluntary and involuntary associations in which different social groups hold positions of authority or subordination. These groups, which he referred to as “interest groups” (Dahrendorf, 1958, p.178), clash constantly regarding power and resources, causing a state of tension in society between two opposing forces: order and conflict.

Opposing the Marxist approach, which proposes class conflict as the engine of history, with an emphasis on the economic structure that dominates capitalist societies, Dahrendorf argues that conflict “grows out of this structure and can be eliminated only very temporarily, and only by structural changes” (Dahrendorf, 1959, p.114). Furthermore, there is no need for a revolution or destruction of the social order. On the contrary, he sees conflict as a mechanism for social change and adaptation, understanding that it is not only destructive, but also constructive, since it can lead to the transformation or creation of norms and institutions. This view contrasts again with the Marxist approach, which sees class conflict as leading to the fall of capitalism and the emergence of a classless society (see Marx & Engels, 1948; Dahrendorf, 1959).

Dahrendorf also proposed a fundamental distinction between latent interests and manifest interests, arguing that the former concern potential conflicts that exist due to the unequal power structure, but which have not yet been visibly expressed. Manifest interests, on the other hand, are previously externalised and take the form of protests, strikes and other types of collective action. By arguing that “latent interests are articulated into manifest interests; and the quasi-groups become the recruiting fields of organised interest groups of the class type” (Dahrendorf, 1959, p. 239), and that conflict can be triggered by political events, economic crises and/or the emergence of charismatic leaders who channel popular discontent, the author rejects the simplistic view that the ruling classes exercise total control over their subordinates. Instead, the approach suggests that power relations are always contested

and negotiated, even if implicitly, where this more complex view of social power is fundamental to the construction of his theory of conflict, which sees modern societies as composed of a multiplicity of interrelated conflicts, which overlap and influence each other.

### Contemporary populism

Although there is no single definition of populism, most scholars agree that it is characterised by a fundamental dichotomy between the people and the elite, where the populist leader claims to represent directly and truly popular interests in opposition to a group of corrupt elites disconnected from the reality of the masses, as outlined in the work of Cas Mudde (2004). This author defines populism as “an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’” (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). This dualistic framework allows populist leaders to simplify complex issues and present direct solutions, often in an undemocratic manner, by accusing established institutions of not serving the true interests of the communities.

A central aspect of populism that is consistently debated at the academic level is its anti-institutionalist character. According to Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2019), populism directly challenges democratic institutions by depicting them as “enemies of the people”, often accused of serving only the interests of elites. This attack on institutions is a recurring feature of populist leaders, as evidenced in the governments of Donald Trump in the United States, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (see Hawkins, 2009; Hobolt, 2016; Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Kudors & Pabriks, 2017; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). These leaders are often seen as outsiders, promising to purge the system of elite corruption and restore power to the people. While it is true that “populists tend to deny the legitimacy of established parties, attacking them as undemocratic and even unpatriotic” (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 22), they have also become associated with a heightened

sense of nationalism and the construction of a collective identity that excludes those perceived as “the others”.

Moreover, contemporary populism makes intensive use of digital media and vast technological communication networks, such as social media, to amplify the dissemination of its message and mobilise its core electorate. As Benjamin Moffitt (2016) notes, modern populist leaders are highly effective in using platforms like Twitter and Facebook to broadcast messages directly to the public, bypassing the filters and traditional requirements of mass media. The argument that “the emergence of the mass media has enabled populist figures to appeal directly to mass constituencies without any sort of institutional intermediation” (Roberts, 2006, in Moffitt, 2016, p. 90), reinforces the narrative that populists are the authentic, true voice of popular interests. The strategic use of digital communication has been crucial to the success of many contemporary populist leaders, including Ventura in Portugal and Trump in the USA. They keep up with technological and communicational developments, promoting ideas through the wider networks of the internet to rally their electoral constituencies and discredit their opponents, thereby gaining strength and power in the social sphere.

The efforts by various scholars to develop a comprehensive and theoretically informed definition of the phenomenon have led to what is considered ideological flexibility. While both right-wing and left-wing populisms share the fundamental principle of antagonism between the people and the elite, they diverge in their political orientations. A coherent sociological approach reveals the importance of distinguishing between the ideal types presented. According to Hawkins (2009), right-wing populism typically focuses on cultural issues, such as immigration and national sovereignty, while left-wing populism emphasises economic issues, such as income redistribution and the fight against neoliberalism. This distinction is evident in the rise of right-wing leaders like Orbán and Trump, as well as in the emergence of left-wing figures such as Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia. This ideological diversity highlights that populism is not inherently

progressive or reactionary, but rather a political tactic adaptable to different contexts.

This discussion has profound, widespread implications, including for liberal democracy. Recent research suggests that populism is not only a threat to democratic institutions, but also to the very concept of pluralism. In general, populists “claim that they, and they alone, represent the people” (Müller, 2016, p.8). This monolithic view of popular representation is one of the greatest challenges posed by populist regimes, which tend to erode the foundations of democratic dialogue and the institutions of checks and balances. It is widely acknowledged that there is an ambiguous need to develop conceptual and empirical analyses in the fields of sociology and philosophy, aimed at demystifying opinions and knowledge derived from non-standardised personal beliefs and experiences. It is important to adapt existing contributions to the national context, emphasising their empirical relevance to current political administration processes.

### **Dahrendorf and Populism: A Theoretical Manifestation**

Although Dahrendorf did not directly address populism, his insights into the unequal distribution of power in modern industrial societies and the intrinsic social traits of conflict provide a valuable framework for understanding how the concept of populism emerges and feeds on social tensions. According to Dahrendorf, conflict is a structural feature of postmodernism, arising from unequal access to power, assuming that there is indeed a “differential distribution of power and authority” (Dahrendorf, 1959, p. 165). This view that societies are permeated by latent conflicts among various interest groups can be applied to the analysis of populism, where populist leaders feed on tensions between the people and the elites, in order to gain political support. In *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society* (1959), Dahrendorf identifies the populists’ claims of representing the people against a corrupt or failed system, where the former embody a form of social conflict that,

in Dahrendorfian terms, reflects the struggle for power among groups with different levels of authority and influence.

One of the main sources of conflict in modern societies is related to the structure of authority, i.e., “there are some whose task it is to control the actions of others and issue commands, and others who have to allow themselves to be controlled and who have to obey” (Dahrendorf, 1959, p. 71). In the context of contemporary populism, this imbalance of authority can be seen in the way populists criticise democratic institutions, accusing them of being controlled by distant elites who ignore the demands and interests of the people. By creating a dichotomy between “us” and “them”<sup>12</sup>, populist discourse capitalises on this unequal distribution of authority, which Dahrendorf (1958) identifies as a fundamental source of social conflict.

As we have already seen, this theory proposes a distinction between latent interests and manifest interests, which is particularly relevant to understanding populism. Latent interests are based on tensions that exist within a society, which have not yet been externalised in the form of collective action. In contemporary societies, populists are able to transform these latent interests into manifest ones, rallying segments of the population that feel marginalised or disillusioned with traditional political institutions. Populism often reveals the discursive construction of social antagonism, in which the populist leaders present themselves as the voice of the latent interests of the people. This echoes Dahrendorf’s analysis of the transformation of latent conflicts into manifest conflicts, where he argues that “charismatic leadership and crisis events can trigger the externalization of latent social conflicts” (Dahrendorf, 1958, p. 85).

Another point of connection between Dahrendorf’s theory and populism lies in the notion that representational tensions, especially in

12 “We” represents the subjected people and “They” the dominant elite. Ralf Dahrendorf’s view discusses the role of context in changing Imperatively Coordinated Associations (ICAs), which refer to hierarchical associations of individuals in need of authority, which depends primarily on legitimacy, and which is constantly called into question.

the establishment of social order, can be both a destructive and constructive force. Since the phenomenon of conflict is an essential part of structuring social change, which can lead to the development of new norms and institutions (see Dahrendorf, 1959), populism particularly exacerbates these social conflicts by discrediting democratic institutions and proposing an authoritarian or illiberal alternative. Today, some authors point out that populists often undermine confidence in democratic institutions and promote short-term solutions that ultimately weaken democracy (see Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018)<sup>13</sup>.

The institutional regulation of conflict is one of the main characteristics of democratic societies, where tensions are managed through political systems that ensure dialogue and negotiation among different interest groups. However, populism often rejects these forms of institutional mediation, preferring to appeal directly to the people and weaken the institutions that traditionally regulate social conflict. Müller (2016) suggested, then, that populism not only rejects pluralism, but also opposes mediating institutions, which are seen as obstacles to the direct expression of the will of the people, creating a scenario of direct, unmediated conflict in which the ability of societies to resolve tensions peacefully and institutionally is severely limited.

### Critical and Reflective Considerations

The intersection between social conflict and contemporary populism reveals a complex dynamic that has manifested in societies across the globe. Analysing Ralf Dahrendorf's theory provides a strong theoretical framework for understanding the social tensions fuelled by power imbalances and disputes over resources, which often result in the rise of populist movements. In line with this reasoning, populism taps into the resentment and

frustration of the masses, particularly in times of crisis, creating a narrative that opposes the subjected people to the elites who oppress them. This duality represents fertile ground for political polarisation and the erosion of democratic institutions. A concrete, current example that illustrates this dynamic is the election of Donald Trump in the United States in 2016. Trump's populist rhetoric tapped into the economic frustrations of segments of the population who felt left behind by globalisation and the traditional political elite. Norris & Inglehart (2019) argued that, by affirming that politicians are corrupt and do not care about individuals, Trump managed to mobilise massive support among voters who felt alienated. This rhetoric challenged democratic norms and contributed to an environment of increasing political polarisation and growing distrust among social institutions.

A comparable phenomenon to this significant example is the rise of populism in South America, where leaders like Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil or Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico employed populist rhetoric to resonate with the masses (see Kudors & Pabriks, 2017; Matiuta, 2017; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). In Europe, the rise of populist parties, such as the Five Star Movement in Italy and the Alternative for Germany party, exemplifies how the economic crisis and mass migration have generated a populist rhetoric that polarises society. These parties have support "among the older generation, men, those lacking college education, and among traditionalists most opposed to progressive cultural values, such as in their attitudes towards sexuality, religion, multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, and tolerance of foreigners" (Inglehart & Norris, 2016, p. 16).

Furthermore, they highlight the relevance of Dahrendorf's theory in reflecting on how social inequalities can catalyse conflict and populist mobilisation. As we analyse these phenomena, it is crucial that future studies delve deeper into the interactions between power structures and populist movements, seeking to understand how social and political crises shape new forms of mobilisation, resistance, and representation. Future research should consider the plurality of voices

<sup>13</sup> In this regard, populism can be seen as an example of how conflict, when manipulated to the extreme, can destabilise the social order without necessarily generating constructive changes.

and experiences that characterise populism, recognising that it is not a homogeneous phenomenon but a series of adaptive responses to specific social contexts.

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