Ludwig Gumplowicz was a pioneer social conflict theorist. He focused on the driving factors behind social conflict, highlighting racial hatreds as a major conflict factor (Gumplowicz, 1980). Moreover, he considered conflict to be a cycle that brought on the economic exploitation of others. Gumplowicz emphasized that one social group would come to dominate others in an emerging society. The dominant group would not be required to be the mainstream subgroup or demographic majority in a society. However, this group, equipped with social, economic, and political might, would end up molding into shape the definitive characteristics of the community through establishment of rule, laws, and a unifying identity (Baali, 1988). Gumplowicz proposed that mankind had no common origin and that all societies are the byproducts of the never-ending struggle for survival and dominance of the groups that came before them.

Gumplowicz suggested that history is a repetitive cycle consisting of groups attacking, suppressing, and absorbing one and other. The state emerges as a means to subjugate inferior groups, and laws are formulated to help govern them. This cycle of inequality drives the continual formation of social groups. Due to his Darwinist and scientific approach, Gumplowicz advocated that society should be analyzed “purely in naturalistic terms, without any resource to metaphysical or supernatural explanations, to establish scientific sociology” (in Faghirzadeh, 1982: 189). Thus, Gumplowicz was key in developing an empirical methodology for sociological studies. He developed his theories on social group conflicts through a focal point on racial struggle. The racial struggle for dominance is the driving force behind history, whether it be vicious, or passive and nonviolent. He proposed that racial hatred was an inherent trait within humans, and that this primal hatred brought on violence, slavery, genocide, and other atrocities (Weikart, 2003). Gumplowicz claimed “the function of sociology consists of showing that universal laws apply to social phenomena” (Gumplowicz, 1980: 82). He described social and cultural evolution as a continuous struggle amongst social groups and that this served as “the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest among individuals.” He stated that this social struggle surpassed the individual one as a part of the theory of evolution. In addition, he claimed that, since the individual was a product of the group, only the group held any true significance (Timasheff, 1966).

Gumplowicz described that war between social groups was influenced by the groups’ desire to expand their economic dominance. War results in violence and aggression against the group being conquered. Furthermore, groups have motivations in subjugating and economically exploiting their conquered subjects. Gumplowicz theorized that the concept known as the state originated from one social group establishing dominance over another. State formation is followed by wars between states driven by the urge for conquest. In addition, class struggle emerges within the state as the dominant social class realizes it can protect and further extend its hegemony by establishing laws and political bodies of power (Timasheff, 1966).

Gumplowicz’s philosophy was inspired by the polygenetic hypothesis, the concept that mankind has multiple origins instead of a single common ancestor. He claimed that group conflict was the result of racial hatred inherent in mankind stemming from this polygenetic origin. Gumplowicz asserted that through this struggle, social groups can extend themselves or combine with other multiple social groups to form a new singular social body (Sorokin, 1928). In such cases, the resultant social body subjugates the conquered group and must successfully manage it through numerous steps. First, a new state is formed as a result of the conquering and conquered groups.
unifying. The conquerors become the entitled and ruling class at the expense and exploitation of the subjugated group. Second, law is established as the whole body of rules determined by the ruling conqueror group as a means of controlled exploitation over the conquered subjects. Third, the emergence of social classes through inequality turns the conquerors into an aristocratic class, and the subjugated group into the lower class. Finally, cultural differences between the conquerors and the subjugated are gradually diminished as result of the conquerors dominance over the language and religion of the subjugated. However, as the cultural gaps are closed between the two classes, the class differences remain in place (Sorokin, 1928). This process usually continues with further cohesion between the two groups until this social body is subjugated by an outside social group, and the process is repeated from the beginning.

Gumplowicz claimed this repetition is a key historical mechanism (Sorokin, 1928) and asserted that, even though gradual evolution and progress in cohesion occurs in each state, there are always barbarians who remain waiting to initiating this historical cycle of conquest and subjugation. Powerful states recede into failure partially as a result of domestic dynamics that cause internal turmoil and destabilization. He stated that there is no absolute progress or retrogression in history, but rather only subjective instances of localized progress in certain countries and eras (Gumplowicz, 1980).

Lester Frank Ward (1907: 205), a pioneering American sociologist, summarized Gumplowicz’s societal theories in the book *Pure Sociology: A Treatise on the Origin and Spontaneous Development of Society*. Ward outlined the process thus: First, one race is subjugated by another. Second, castes emerge as the conquerors form a superior strata and the subjects a lower one. Third, this severe class schism settles into a situation of social and political inequality. Fourth, the initial military dominance gradually transforms itself into dominance via set of laws. This formation of law also brings about with it the idea of legal rights belonging to groups and individuals. Next, the state forms and all classes under it are designated legal rights and civil obligations. Later, heterogeneous elements in the society gradually blend into one another through cultural integration and assimilation, leading to a relatively homogeneous people. Finally, a nation emerges. Thus all political bodies, including emerging civilizations, begin with one group permanently subjugating another (Gumplowicz, 1980): “Gumplowicz developed his sociology of war as a necessary prerequisite to social progress” (Sklar, 1970: 70).

SEE ALSO: Comte, Auguste; Conflict (Racial/Ethnic); Conflict Theory; Durkheim, Émile; Positivism; Ratzenhofer, Gustav; Simmel, Georg; Small, Albion W.; Social Darwinism; Spencer, Herbert; State; Ward, Lester Frank

References


